Stonequill's Travels

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On the Road

The air inside the cottage was thick with the scent of pinewood and old parchment, a comforting aroma that wrapped itself around the sturdy walls of the dwarf's home. The burly figure of Thorgar Stonequill—his broad shoulders hunched slightly as he cinched the straps of his pack—stood in the center of the single-room dwelling. His thick black beard, woven with a few silver beads, swayed slightly as he moved, his keen eyes scanning the room one last time before departure.

His cottage was built from stout timber, its roof thatched and reinforced with stone along the edges to keep the harsh winds at bay. A large stone hearth dominated one side, its embers glowing faintly from a fire long since burned down. Shelves lined the walls, stacked with thick tomes bound in cracked leather, scrolls stuffed into cubbyholes, and a few small relics from past excavations—a chipped dwarven statuette, a gleaming silver coin of ancient mint, and a rusted buckle he had yet to place in history. A sturdy wooden table stood beneath the only window, its surface littered with scattered notes, a half-emptied inkpot, and a quill still resting in its stand.

The warm glow of a single lantern flickered, casting long shadows across the packed-earth floor. A heavy oak chest sat at the foot of his cot, its lid slightly ajar, revealing neatly folded clothes, a thick woolen cloak, and a few well-used maps. Thorgar sighed, rolling his shoulders before securing his belt. He was clad in worn leather armor, the kind that had seen years of use but was still sturdy enough to protect against the unexpected dangers of the road. A short sword hung at his hip, its hilt wrapped in darkened leather.

On the small table, his backpack lay open as he made final adjustments. Pots and pans clattered against each other as he tucked them into place, along with a tightly bound bedroll. A waterskin sloshed as he checked the seal, then tucked it into the side pocket. His coin purse, heavy with enough gold and silver to last a while, disappeared into the depths of the pack. Most importantly, he slipped his journal inside—a thick tome bound in deep brown leather, its pages filled with past musings and blank space awaiting new discoveries. He added an ink bottle, a quill, and a small bundle of candles, knowing that many nights would be spent by flickering light as he documented his travels.

Thorgar took one last look around. This cottage had been his home for many years, a place of comfort and solitude, but the road called once again. With a grunt, he swung the heavy pack onto his back, adjusting the straps before stepping to the door. He grasped the iron latch, took a breath, and pushed it open. The crisp morning air rushed in, carrying the scent of damp earth and pine. Before him stretched the rolling hills, the dense woodland beyond, and the winding road that would lead him to adventure.

With a final nod to his home, Thorgar Stonequill stepped forward. The journey had begun.

The footpath was well-worn, winding through the dense grove where the morning light filtered through the leaves in golden patches. Thorgar's boots crunched softly against the dirt, his broad form moving at a steady pace as he chewed on a chunk of dense, nutty bread. His backpack, heavy with supplies, shifted slightly with each step. He reached inside to retrieve a crisp apple, biting into it with a satisfying crunch. The taste was tart and refreshing, a fine companion to the morning air.

Birdsong filled the quiet grove, but soon, another sound joined it—a deep, rich voice carrying through the trees, accompanied by the light, airy melody of a flute. Thorgar slowed his steps, listening. The voice was strong and clear, singing words in the common tongue:

"Through battle and storm, through fire and shade,
A hero shall rise, though his heart be afraid.
With blade in his grip and love on his mind,
He fights not for gold, but for those left behind."

The voice belonged to a figure seated atop a fallen log at the edge of the path—an orc, clad in a travel-worn cloak and a simple tunic, his boots dusty from the road. His broad green fingers danced over the holes of a wooden flute, finishing the tune with a final, wistful note before lowering the instrument. Across his back hung an ancient, dented lute, its strings slightly frayed but well-loved.

Thorgar strode forward, raising a thick, calloused hand in greeting. “Well now, that’s a voice that carries! And words worth listenin’ to. That your own work, lad?”

The orc grinned, tusks glinting in the dappled light. “Indeed! Gorthak the Even-Handed at your service—bard, teller of tales, and collector of songs from all corners of the realm.” He tapped his chest proudly before tucking his flute away. “And who might you be, traveler?”

“Thorgar Stonequill. Writer. Wanderer. Sometimes digger of old things,” the dwarf replied, shifting the pack on his shoulders. “And sometimes listener of fine music, when the chance comes. What brings an orc bard to these parts?”

“A noble purpose,” Gorthak said, his deep voice full of dramatic flair. “I make my way to the Grand Conclave of Bards—a gathering where the finest voices, storytellers, and musicians of the land come together to share their craft. A festival of song, held but once a year!”

Thorgar nodded with interest. “A fine thing, that. And yer song back there—one o’ yours?”

“Every word.” Gorthak’s grin widened. “I compose all my songs. Tales of heroism, lost loves, and the foolish missteps of drunken kings. I’ve spent years gathering the stories of villages, cities, and road-weary travelers, turning them into melodies that endure. A bard must not only sing—he must remember.”

Thorgar chuckled. “Aye, memory’s a fine thing, but I’ve found a good book keeps a tale from slippin’ away.” He patted the thick tome strapped to his pack. “I write what I see, what I hear. Not songs, mind ye, but stories just the same.”

Gorthak’s eyes gleamed. “Then we are kindred spirits, my dwarven friend! Words, whether sung or written, shape the world more than steel ever could.” He leaned forward conspiratorially. “Would you like to hear another?”

Thorgar stroked his beard, considering. “If it’s got fewer lost loves and more heroes kickin’ in goblin skulls, then aye.”

Gorthak laughed heartily. “Ah, a fellow of action, I see! Then let me tell you of Boldrik the Foolish, the knight who mistook a dragon for a hill and built his house upon its back!”

The road stretched on beneath the steady rhythm of their boots, winding through the green embrace of the forest. Sunlight dappled the path as Thorgar and Gorthak walked side by side, the orc's lute bobbing against his back with each step. The morning air was crisp, carrying the scent of damp earth and distant pine.

"So tell me, Stonequill," Gorthak began, adjusting the strap of his pack, "what is it that drives a dwarf to wander? Most of your kin prefer the deep halls of the mountains, their feet firm on stone rather than dirt."

Thorgar grunted. "Aye, most do. But not me. There's stories out here, lad—old places, forgotten things. I've always had a mind for what came before, the folk who walked these roads long 'fore we did. A mine's got riches, sure, but history's the real treasure."

Gorthak nodded. "Spoken like a bard in your own right. You seek to preserve the past with ink instead of song." He plucked a loose string on his lute, tuning it idly. "And what's the grandest thing you've ever found?"

Thorgar thought for a moment. "Once stumbled on an old tomb in the Craglands—half-buried in the hillside. Inside, there were murals, carvings showin' some ancient battle, a tale lost to time. Took what notes I could, sketched a few bits of it. But the best part?" He smiled. "The tomb was empty. No skeleton, no sarcophagus. Like whoever was meant to be buried there walked away."

Gorthak let out a low whistle. "A story unfinished. Now that's a thing worth singing about."

They walked for a few more hours, exchanging tales—Thorgar spoke of ruins swallowed by time, Gorthak regaled him with stories of jaded noblemen and mischievous sprites. Eventually, the path opened up to a small river, its clear waters bubbling over smooth stones.

Thorgar clapped the orc on the shoulder. "Think I'll make camp here for a bit."

Gorthak nodded, pulling his flute from his belt. "Then I shall grant you one last tune before I take my leave."

As Thorgar settled onto a flat rock by the water, he pulled a length of fishing cord from his pack and began digging into the soft earth for worms. He threaded one onto the hook, gave it a little wiggle of satisfaction, and cast the line into the river.

Behind him, Gorthak lifted his flute and began to play—a soft, meandering tune that danced through the air like wind through the trees. The melody was gentle, wistful, as if bidding farewell to a friend yet hoping to meet again. When the last note faded, Gorthak slung his lute over his shoulder.

"Well met, Stonequill," the orc said with a grin. "May the road bring you songs worth remembering."

Thorgar gave him a nod. "And may your strings never snap mid-performance."

With a hearty laugh, Gorthak turned and followed the road westward, his humming soon lost to the rustling of the trees.

Thorgar sat in the quiet, watching the river ripple around his fishing line. Minutes passed, then a sudden tug. With a practiced hand, he pulled the line in, revealing a fine silver trout wriggling in protest. “Aye, yer a good size,” he muttered, dispatching it with a quick motion of his knife.

He cleaned the fish, discarding the guts into the water for the river creatures, then set about building a small fire. Soon, the scent of sizzling trout filled the air as he cooked it in his pan, seasoning it with a pinch of salt from his pack.

When the fish was crisped to perfection, he ate in comfortable silence, the warmth of the meal settling deep in his bones. Once finished, he leaned back against a tree, pulling out his clay pipe and stuffing it with fine pipeweed. With a flick of flint and steel, he lit it, drawing in a long, slow breath. The smoke curled lazily above him, blending with the gentle drift of the river mist.

Reaching into his pack, he withdrew his journal, flipping to a fresh page. Dipping his quill into ink, he scratched down a few notes:

Met a bard today—Gorthak the Even-Handed.
An orc with a voice as rich as spiced ale and a heart that beats to the rhythm of his own tunes. Carries an old lute, dented but well-loved, much like the stories he tells. Writes his own songs —says a bard must not only sing, but remember. A truth worth keeping.

He paused, tapping his quill against the edge of the book. Then, with a small smile, he added one last line:

Plays a fine tune, but still no match for a good plate of fried trout.

With a chuckle, he closed the book, exhaled a plume of smoke, and let the peaceful quiet of the river settle around him.

Thorgar sat a while longer by the river, savoring the lingering warmth of the sun on his face. The pipeweed curled lazily from his lips, blending with the crisp afternoon air. The world felt still, save for the gentle bubbling of the water and the rustling of leaves in the breeze. It was a good moment, a rare kind of peace that only the road could offer.

Eventually, he knocked the ashes from his pipe, stretched his legs, and set about washing his pan in the river. The cold water ran over his hands, refreshing him for the long walk ahead. With everything packed once more, he hoisted his heavy backpack and took to the road again.

The path wound through rolling hills, then dipped into woodland trails where the air grew cooler, the light dimmer. The trees here stood taller, their thick canopies filtering the afternoon sun into a soft green glow. The scent of damp earth filled Thorgar’s nostrils, mixed with the faint sweetness of wild berries growing along the path.

He spotted a bush laden with ripe, deep-blue berries and plucked a handful, popping them into his mouth. Their tart juice burst against his tongue, refreshing after the long walk. Not far from the bush, nestled among the roots of an old oak, he found a small cluster of

mushrooms—earthy brown caps with thick stems. Pulling his small knife from his belt, he carefully cut a few, tucking them into a cloth pouch for later.

As he stood, his keen eyes caught sight of something else—a twisting vine creeping up the side of a nearby tree, its leaves a rich, deep red. Thorgar smiled. “Redvine,” he muttered to himself, plucking a few leaves and stuffing them into his pouch. “Good smokin’ for the cold nights.”

He continued on, the forest growing thicker around him. The air took on a hushed, almost reverent quality, as if the woods themselves were listening. Then, just ahead, he heard it—a faint, melodic sound, like distant laughter carried on the wind.

Curious, he pressed on until he reached a stream, its waters clear and inviting as they tumbled over smooth stones. As he stepped closer, he recognized the place—The Laughing Stream. He had heard of it before, a little legend passed along by travelers. They said that those who drank from it would hear its laughter and be granted a stroke of good luck.

Kneeling by the bank, Thorgar unfastened his waterskin and dipped it into the cool water. As he filled it, he cupped his other hand and took a few deep gulps. The taste was crisp, clean, refreshing—and the moment it passed his lips, the stream let out a bright, joyful chuckle, as if amused by his thirst.

Thorgar wiped his beard, grinning. “A merry stream indeed,” he muttered. “Let’s hope yer luck is real.”

The sun had begun its slow descent, casting long shadows across the woods. Knowing the night was coming, Thorgar found a clearing beneath an old pine and set down his pack. He gathered some dry wood and kindling, striking flint to steel until the fire crackled to life.

With his boots off and his legs stretched before the flames, he stuffed his pipe with the Redvine leaves and took a deep, slow draw. The smoke was rich, smooth, with a faint hint of spice. He exhaled contentedly, flipping open his journal to record the day’s findings.

The Laughing Stream is no mere tale. I drank from it, and it laughed—a sound of pure joy, as if water itself could know mirth. What magic lingers here, I do not know, but it is the kind that does not demand explanation. A stream that grants luck is a fine thing, but a stream that laughs simply because it can—that is rarer still.

He leaned back, watching the flames dance, listening to the sounds of the forest settling into night. His eyelids grew heavy, the warmth of the fire lulling him into sleep. As the embers glowed softly in the dark, Thorgar Stonequill drifted off, his dreams filled with distant songs and the gentle laughter of water.

The morning air was crisp and cool as Thorgar stirred from his slumber. The fire had died down to soft embers, and the sky above was tinged with the soft hues of dawn. Stretching with a groan, he sat up and rubbed the sleep from his eyes. The forest was quiet, save for the occasional bird call and the rustling of leaves in the breeze.

With practiced hands, he retrieved his pan and set it over the fire, tossing in the mushrooms he had gathered the day before. They sizzled and popped as they cooked, releasing a rich,

earthy aroma. Tearing off a chunk of bread, he used it to scoop up the mushrooms, savoring the simple but hearty meal.

Once finished, he packed his belongings, rolling up his blanket and securing it to his pack. With everything in place, he slung the heavy load over his back, gave one last glance at the clearing, and set out once more on the winding road.

Hours passed as he walked, the path shifting from thick forest to rolling grasslands. The sun was rising high when a peculiar sound caught his attention—a series of loud *clanks*, followed by a metallic *whirrrrr*, then an abrupt *BOING!*

Thorgar stopped in his tracks, furrowing his brows. “What in the nine hells was that?”

Rounding a bend, he found the source of the noise—a gnome, no taller than his waist, hunched over a bizarre contraption with wheels, gears, and pipes sticking out at odd angles. The gnome wore thick goggles, his wild shock of white hair sticking out in all directions as he frantically twisted a wrench around a bolt that didn’t seem to want to stay in place.

The machine itself was unlike anything Thorgar had ever seen—a collection of metal plates, spinning mechanisms, and what looked like an actual leather seat strapped to the top. One of the wheels had come loose and now lay on its side, still spinning slightly.

“Ah-ha! A traveler!” the gnome exclaimed, spotting Thorgar and waving his wrench wildly. “Just the sturdy frame I needed! Quick, quick, lend a hand before she implodes!”

Thorgar blinked. “She?”

“The *Dynamo-Hoof 3000!*” the gnome declared, slapping the side of the machine. “My finest invention! A self-propelled, horse-speed, wheel-driven, wind-resistant, steam-powered *mechanical stallion*! Or it *would* be, if it weren’t currently an inert pile of mechanical brilliance in need of immediate assistance! Now, hold this!”

Before Thorgar could object, the gnome shoved a long metal rod into his hands.

“Err… what’s this?”

“The *counter-rotational stabilizer*! Keeps the lateral momentum from disengaging the forward torque! Obviously!”

Thorgar stared. “That’s a stick.”

“*Aha!* A man of simple terms! I like that. Fine, fine, call it a stick if you must, but hold it *there*, exactly *there*, lest the whole equilibrium collapse in upon itself and we both get launched into the sky in a most undignified fashion!”

Thorgar grumbled, but did as he was told, holding the “stabilizer” in place while the gnome scurried beneath the contraption, rattling off words that made no sense to the dwarf whatsoever.

“By the gears of Garl, I knew I should have reinforced the rotational glide-fins! But no, Tobren, you said, *‘Let’s keep it light for maximum speed!’* Bah! Foolish, foolish! Oh! Pass me the *twin-bolt modulator!*”

Thorgar looked at the pile of tools the gnome had spread out. “Which one’s that?”

“The thingamajig with the doohickey on the end!”

Thorgar sighed. “Yer makin’ these words up, aren’t ye?”

“I assure you, sir, that the *twin-bolt modulator* is a *highly* technical term among the mechanically enlightened! No time for questioning! Just pass me the one that *looks like it could doom us both if wielded improperly!*”

Thorgar grabbed something that looked sufficiently dangerous and handed it over. The gnome cackled triumphantly, diving back into the tangle of gears and pipes.

After much clanking, muttering, and what Thorgar was sure was entirely unnecessary yelling, Tobren finally emerged, wiping grease from his forehead.

“AHA! Fixed! The Dynamo-Hoof LIVES!”

Thorgar stepped back as the gnome gave the machine a firm *whack* with his wrench. The gears whirred, steam hissed from a small exhaust pipe, and the whole contraption *shuddered* before settling into a gentle hum. The loose wheel now sat firmly in place.

“Good as new!” Tobren grinned. “Well, good as ‘not immediately collapsing into a flaming heap.’ Which, in my line of work, is a *success!*”

Thorgar shook his head, rubbing his temples. “Yer a mad one, gnome.”

“Ah, but where would the world be without madness, my sturdy friend?” Tobren hopped onto the seat, gripping the handlebars. “Now! Time for the grand test! If she runs, I shall see you on the other side of glory! If she *explodes*—” he paused, considering. “Well… I suppose it was nice meeting you, and please inform my sister that I’d like to be buried with my toolbelt.”

Before Thorgar could respond, Tobren yanked a lever. The machine *lurched* forward, kicking up dust as the wheels spun. With a wild *whoop*, the gnome shot off down the road at a speed neither natural nor particularly safe.

Thorgar watched as the contraption wobbled violently, weaving from side to side before disappearing over a small hill—followed, moments later, by a distant *crash* and a plume of smoke.

The dwarf sighed, shaking his head. “Should’ve stayed by the river.”

And with that, he slung his pack over his shoulder and continued his journey, leaving behind the faint sounds of Tobren’s delighted—or possibly panicked—shouting in the distance. He made a few notes in his book, "Met a gnome by the name of Tobren—mad as a drunken elf at

a goblin wedding. Calls himself an inventor, but from what I saw, he's more of a danger to himself and anyone within ten paces. Built a 'mechanical stallion'—a contraption of wheels, pipes, and sheer lunacy. Broke down the moment I laid eyes on it. I held a 'stabilizer rod' (which was just a stick) while he ranted about counter-rotational torque and sky-bound velocity. Then, like a true genius, he fixed it just long enough to launch himself straight into a ditch. If there's justice in the world, I'll never cross paths with him again… but I suspect fate has other plans."

Thorgar had barely dusted the last remnants of Tobren's madness from his sleeves when the scent of roasted nuts and fresh bread filled the air. His stomach, ever attuned to such things, gave a low, expectant rumble.

Up ahead, a small figure ambled down the road—a halfling, stout of build, with a wide-brimmed hat perched jauntily atop his curly brown hair. He carried a wooden keg slung across his back, and from the look of his ruddy cheeks and the merry tune he whistled, it was clear he was a brewer by trade.

"Ho there, traveler!" the halfling called, shifting the weight of the keg as he approached. "You look like a dwarf who appreciates a good drink!"

Thorgar smiled. "Aye, and you look like a halfling who's got one."

The halfling chuckled, setting down his keg and dusting his hands. "Milo Bristlebarrel, brewer of fine ales, gatherer of grand tales! And you, sir?"

"Thorgar Stonequill. Wanderer. Writer. Consumer of fine ales."

"Well met, then!" Milo said with a grin. "I'd offer you a pint, but I'm saving this batch for the festival in Brindleshire. A fine brew, but not the one I came to talk about." He leaned in conspiratorially. "Tell me, have you ever heard of The Ale That Time Forgot?"

Thorgar's brow furrowed. "Sounds like a fool's tale."

"Oh, it's real," Milo said, his voice dropping to a whisper. "An ancient dwarven ale, brewed only once every hundred years—until the clan that made it vanished. No one's tasted it in generations. Some say the recipe was lost forever."

Thorgar crossed his arms. "And what makes ye think otherwise?"

Milo grinned. "Because I know where the last known copy of the recipe *might* be."

The dwarf's eyes narrowed. "Go on."

"There's an old dwarven brewery in the hills not far from here," Milo explained. "Belonged to the *Ironbeard Clan*, but they disappeared ages ago. The place is abandoned now—overgrown, crumbling, forgotten. But if the recipe still exists, it would be there."

Thorgar stroked his beard, interest piqued. A lost ale, an abandoned brewery, and a piece of dwarven history waiting to be uncovered? Now that was something worth chasing.

“And let me guess,” he said, raising a brow. “Ye need someone to go pokin’ about in the ruins for ye?”

Milo raised his hands innocently. “I’m a brewer, not an adventurer! Collapsed tunnels and hidden notes? That’s dwarven trade.” He nudged his keg. “But if you find it and manage to brew even a single batch, well… you’d have something no living dwarf has tasted in centuries. And the respect of your kin? Priceless.”

Thorgar exhaled through his nose, glancing toward the hills ahead. He had planned to simply wander, write, and maybe drink a decent ale along the way. But an *ancient* ale? One his ancestors might have brewed and drunk themselves?

That was a quest worth undertaking.

“Aye then,” he said, adjusting his pack. “Point me the way.”

Milo clapped his hands together. “Now *that’s* the spirit! The ruins are a day’s walk northeast, nestled in a valley. You’ll know it when you see the old stone arch with the Ironbeard crest.”

Thorgar gave a firm nod, already thinking ahead. An old brewery would be a challenge—rubble, broken equipment, maybe a few creatures that had taken up residence. But nothing worth doing ever came easy.

With a final handshake, Milo hoisted his keg and went on his way, whistling once more.

Thorgar tightened the straps of his pack, set his boots to the road, and marched toward the forgotten brewery—toward history itself.

The road northeast took Thorgar through rugged hills, the land growing wilder with each passing mile. The grass was thick, the stones jagged, and the wind carried the scent of damp earth and distant pine. The day stretched long, his boots pressing firm into the dirt as he marched toward the valley where the old Ironbeard Brewery lay forgotten.

As the sun dipped lower in the sky, he crested a ridge and saw it—just as Milo had described. A great stone arch, cracked and weathered, half-buried in creeping vines. The Ironbeard crest was still visible, though worn with time—a mighty mug overflowing with frothy ale, flanked by crossed barley stalks.

Thorgar ran a hand over the old engraving. “Aye, ye brewed strong, didn’t ye?” he muttered. “Let’s see if I can bring yer work back to life.”

Beyond the arch, the ruins stretched before him—an old stone structure built into the hillside, its roof partially collapsed, ivy strangling its walls. A broken wooden sign, barely legible, read:

IRONBEARD BREWING HALL – EST. ???

The doors were long gone, leaving a yawning entrance into the darkened remains. Thorgar stepped inside, his boots crunching over debris. The scent of old wood, damp stone, and something faintly yeasty still lingered in the air.

The great hall was a wreck. The ceiling had caved in on one side, beams of golden light streaming through the cracks. Barrels lay shattered, tables overturned, and a layer of dust thick enough to write in coated the floor. He spotted rusted brewing kettles against the far wall, their once-polished copper dulled with time.

"Aye… this'll take some doin'."

He set down his pack and pulled out his journal, flipping to a fresh page. Before any digging, any fixing, any brewing—he needed to find that recipe.

Thorgar moved carefully, checking old shelves and crates, searching for anything that might hold the lost instructions. Pages of brewing logs crumbled at his touch, ink faded beyond recognition. A thick tome on an overturned desk seemed promising—*Ironbeard's Brewing Ledger*—but when he opened it, the final pages had been torn out.

"Of course they have," he grumbled.

As he sifted through the rubble, his eye caught a glint of parchment wedged beneath an old barrel. With effort, he pried it free—a fragment of an old brewing note. The words were barely legible, but a few phrases stood out:

"…golden barley of the northern hills…"
"…aged in stone casks…"
"…a final ingredient, rare and sacred…"

The last line was almost entirely smudged, but Thorgar could just make out one word: "emberflower."

He tapped his chin. He had heard of emberflower before—a rare plant, known for growing in old volcanic soil. If it was the key to the lost ale, he'd need to find some.

But first, he needed to get the brewery *working* again. The kettles were intact but rusted, the pipes needed clearing, and the old stone furnace—where the brewing heat would come from—had collapsed in on itself.

"Aye," he sighed, rolling up his sleeves. "Time to work."

For hours, Thorgar labored. He cleared debris, tightened bolts, and checked for any salvageable tools. Near an old workbench, he found a crate of brewing instruments—some broken, some rusted, but a few still usable.

The toughest part was the furnace. It had caved in, but he could see the old forge beneath it, where dwarves once kept the fires burning to heat the kettles. If he could rebuild it, he might be able to get this place running again.

Using a length of rope, a sturdy wooden beam, and every ounce of dwarven grit he had, Thorgar pulled away the heaviest stones, grunting with effort. The old forge underneath was still intact, though long cold.

With some effort, he stacked smaller stones, patching the broken spots. It wouldn't be perfect, but it would hold—long enough to see if this ale was worth its legend.

By the time he was done, the stars had begun to twinkle in the dark sky. He sat by the ruined bar, wiping sweat from his brow, chewing on a bit of dried meat.

He pulled out his journal and scribbled:

The Ironbeard Brewery still stands, barely. The kettles are rusted, the notes are incomplete, and the furnace is only half-fixed. But something remains here—a spirit of old craft. Found mention of an ingredient: emberflower. If I can track it down, I may just taste the past.

With that, he leaned back, staring up at the skeletal remains of the ceiling. Somewhere in these ruins, history still breathed. He just had to bring it back to life.

Morning came with a golden light streaming through the broken roof of the brewery. Thorgar stretched with a groan, rubbing the stiffness from his shoulders. His muscles ached from hauling stone the previous day, but there was work yet to do.

He rummaged through his pack, pulling out a bit of bread and some of the berries he had gathered earlier, chewing thoughtfully as he eyed the old kettles. They were still in decent shape, but brewing The Ale That Time Forgot would mean nothing without the right ingredients.

And one of those, according to the faded notes, was emberflower.

Thorgar had read about emberflower before—an old dwarven ingredient, rare and difficult to find. It was said to grow in places touched by fire, where the soil was rich with old volcanic ash. That meant caves, deep crevices in the hills, or lands once scorched by lava.

Rolling up his sleeves, he packed light—his waterskin, a small satchel for gathering, his short sword, and his book, in case he found something worth noting. With one last glance at the ruined brewery, he set off into the hills.

The land here was rough, jagged with stone and dry underfoot. The deeper he went, the more the grass thinned, giving way to dark, crumbling rock. After an hour of walking, he found what he was looking for—a blackened ravine, its walls steep, with jagged edges of old lava flow. This was the kind of place emberflower could be hiding.

Thorgar took careful steps down into the ravine, loose rock shifting beneath his boots. He ran his fingers along the stone, feeling its warmth even in the cool morning air. This was old fire-born land, for certain.

He scanned the ground, looking for any sign of the rare plant. He had nearly given up when a glint of deep red caught his eye.

Tucked in a crevice between two black stones was a small cluster of emberflowers—fiery red petals curled like flames, with dark stems that twisted like old roots.

“Aye, there ye are,” he muttered, crouching to examine them. They had a faintly spicy scent, almost like smoked cinnamon. Carefully, he took out his knife and snipped a few blossoms, placing them gently into his pouch.

With the key ingredient in hand, he climbed back out of the ravine and made his way toward the brewery.

Back at the Ironbeard ruins, Thorgar set down his findings and took stock of what he had. The brewing kettles were still standing. The water source was a nearby well, which, miraculously, hadn’t dried up. The old grains were useless—long since spoiled—but he had brought his own barley from his travels.

The real challenge was heat.

The furnace was barely holding together, but if he could get it hot enough—just for a short while—he could brew a small test batch.

He stacked wood inside the ancient forge, struck flint to steel, and coaxed a flame to life. The fire roared up, licking the sides of the stone, and the warmth spread through the brewery for the first time in centuries.

Thorgar worked methodically—heating the water, adding the barley, stirring with a makeshift paddle. The scent of malt filled the air, mingling with the faint smoke from the forge.

When the time was right, he added the emberflower. The petals dissolved into the brew, turning the liquid a rich amber color. He gave it a slow stir, watching as tiny wisps of red curled through the drink.

Then came the waiting.

He sat by the fire, arms crossed, watching the mixture bubble. Would it taste like the legends said? Would it be worth the trouble?

He took out his journal and wrote:

The ale is brewing. The emberflower blended well, and the scent is… familiar, yet different. A warmth, like the breath of a forge, but smooth. If the taste holds, I may have uncovered something long thought lost. If not… well, at least I’ll have a warm drink for the night.

As the sun dipped low, the ale settled. He poured a small sample into a wooden cup, the deep golden liquid catching the last light of the evening.

He took a slow sip.

The taste was bold—smooth, rich, with a faint smoky aftertaste that lingered on the tongue. Not just any ale… but one born of the mountains, of fire, of dwarven craft long forgotten.

Thorgar grinned.

The Ale That Time Forgot had returned.

With the discovery of The Ale That Time Forgot, Thorgar wasted no time. If this brew was truly worthy of legend, it needed to be tested by proper dwarven drinkers.

The next morning, he set to work brewing a full keg. Using the makeshift equipment at the ruined Ironbeard Brewery, he worked carefully, measuring out the barley, tending the fire, and stirring the bubbling mixture. Hours passed as the scent of rich malt and emberflower filled the old hall, the fires burning strong in the ancient forge.

By sundown, he had it—a sturdy wooden keg, bound with iron rings, filled with the first batch of Ironbeard Ale in centuries.

"Aye," he muttered, patting the keg like an old friend. "Let's see what the folk think."

He strapped the keg onto an old wooden handcart he had found near the brewery, its wheels barely holding together. With a grunt, he took hold of the handles and began his journey toward the nearest dwarven tavern—the famous Stone Hearth Inn, nestled at the base of the hills.

By the time Thorgar arrived, the sun had fully set, and the tavern was alive with the sounds of dwarven cheer.

The Stone Hearth Inn was built deep into the rock, its walls lined with old mining tools and barrels stacked high with ale. Candles flickered in iron sconces, the scent of roasting meat filled the air, and the sound of a dwarven fiddle played in the background.

Thorgar pushed the cart through the heavy wooden doors, the scent of fresh ale wafting in as he entered.

"Ho there!" called the barkeep, a burly dwarf with a braided beard and arms thick as tree trunks. "What's this ye got, traveler?"

Thorgar dusted off his coat and stepped up to the bar, placing a heavy hand on the keg.

"Something ye ain't tasted in centuries," he said, voice steady and sure. "A lost brew. Aye, the lost ale of the Ironbeard Clan."

The tavern went silent for a moment. Every dwarf within earshot turned, mugs halfway to their lips, eyes wide with disbelief.

"Ye're pullin' my beard," one of them said.

"Ironbeard Ale? That's a fairy tale!"

"Bah! No way ye found that!"

Thorgar grinned and reached into his pack, pulling out the old, tattered brewing notes. He spread them out on the bar. "This is the last written record of it. I brewed it meself, from the ruins of the old Ironbeard Brewery. If ye don't believe me, have a taste."

The barkeep leaned forward, eyes narrowing. Then, without a word, he grabbed a wooden tankard, filled it from the keg, and took a deep swig.

The moment the ale touched his tongue, his bushy eyebrows shot up. He swirled the drink in his mouth, savoring it. The taste—the smooth, rich barley, the smoky emberflower finish—was unlike anything he'd had before.

By the time he swallowed, his eyes were glistening.

"By Moradin's beard… it's true."

The tavern erupted into a roar.

Dwarves crowded around, mugs clanking, voices raised in excitement. "Pour us a pint!" "Gimme a taste!" "If this is real, I'll kiss a goblin!"

The barkeep grinned wide, slamming a fist on the bar. "Thorgar Stonequill, ye mad wanderer—ye brought back dwarven history! I'll take the keg, full price."

Thorgar crossed his arms. "That'll be 150 gold for the keg," he said, smiling. "And if ye want the recipe—200 more."

The barkeep didn't even hesitate. He reached under the bar, pulled out a heavy pouch of gold, and tossed it to Thorgar.

"Done!"

Thorgar caught the pouch with one hand and felt the satisfying weight of hard-earned coin.

"Then let's get to drinkin'."

With the keg tapped, mugs overflowing, and the old Ironbeard brew back in dwarven hands, the party began.

A dwarf with a wild red beard pulled out a fiddle and started up a fast-paced tune. Others stomped their boots to the beat, mugs sloshing ale onto the wooden floors.

A group of dwarves locked arms, swinging each other in a chaotic dance, some nearly tumbling over tables.

The barkeep, now several pints in, threw an arm around Thorgar's shoulders. "By the gods, lad, this ale's gonna put me tavern on the map! If ye ever bring another lost brew, ye come straight to me!"

Thorgar chuckled. "If I find another, I'll be demandin' twice the price."

At one table, two dwarves were having a heated but drunken debate over whether the secret to good ale was the water or the barrels.

Another dwarf, completely lost in drink, stood up and declared himself king of the tavern, before promptly falling backward into a chair.

A heavily intoxicated miner stood on a table, shouting, “TO THE STONEQUILL ALE!” before missing his step and crashing onto the floor.

Thorgar himself wasn’t one to turn down a proper dwarven revel. He drank, laughed, and even found himself dragged into a dance or two.

By the time morning threatened to break, Thorgar had lost count of how many tankards he’d emptied. His head spun, his beard smelled of ale, and his legs had turned to stone.

“Oi, lad,” the barkeep slurred, clapping him on the back. “Rooms upstairs. Ye ain’t makin’ it anywhere else tonight.”

Thorgar, in no state to argue, stumbled his way to the stairs, nearly tripped, and collapsed onto the bed.

As he drifted into unconsciousness, one thought remained in his ale-soaked mind—

That was a damn good night.

The morning sun crept through the wooden shutters of the tavern room, nudging Thorgar awake. His head throbbed—a dull reminder of the revelry from the night before. He groaned, sitting up slowly, rubbing his temples. Dwarven ale was a blessing, but by the gods, it struck back in the morning.

Dragging himself downstairs, he was greeted by the warm scent of fresh bread, sizzling bacon, and roasted potatoes. The Stone Hearth Inn was quieter now, many of last night's drinkers still face-down on their tables or slumped in corners.

The barkeep, still looking a little drunk himself, grinned and slid a tankard over to Thorgar. “Nothing cures a hangover like more ale.”

Thorgar took a long sip of Stonequill Ale, the brew he had revived, and let out a satisfied sigh. “Aye… that’s the stuff.”

Over breakfast, he exchanged farewells and firm handshakes with the dwarves who had danced, drank, and nearly broken the tavern in celebration.

“Bring us more lost ales, Stonequill!” one shouted.

“I’ll drink meself into a legend if ye do!” another added.

With a chuckle, Thorgar slung his heavy pack over his shoulders, adjusted his belt, and stepped back onto the road, ready for whatever the world had in store next.

The sun was high when Thorgar found himself walking along a quiet, winding path through a dry, rocky valley. The terrain here was rough, the cliffs towering above like the jagged teeth of a sleeping beast.

That was when he heard it.

A low, guttural chuckle.

Then another.

Then five large orcs stepped onto the path ahead of him, blocking his way.

They were a mean-looking bunch—scarred, broad-shouldered, their tusks curved like daggers. Their armor was a patchwork of scavenged plate and chain, and each one carried a wicked-looking weapon—axes, maces, and one particularly nasty flail.

The leader, a massive orc with gray war paint streaked across his face, crossed his arms and smiled. “Well now… what do we have here?”

One of the others grunted. “Looks like a fat little gold pouch with legs.”

Thorgar exhaled slowly, rolling his shoulders. He had dealt with bandits before—but this was five orcs, all well-armed. He was a fighter when he had to be, but five on one was grim math.

Instead, he straightened, put on his best scowl, and said, "You lot best think twice. My mighty orc warrior friend is in the area. He'll be here any moment—and when he does, he’ll hack ye all into bloody pieces.”

The orcs stared at him for a moment.

Then the leader burst into laughter.

“Hah! Mighty orc warrior? Oh, I have to hear this. Who’s this ‘killer of armies’ we should be so afraid of?”

Thorgar folded his arms, playing it up. “His name is Gorthak!”

The laughter doubled.

One of the orcs clutched his stomach, wheezing. Another wiped a tear from his eye.

The leader, grinning ear to ear, slapped a hand on his chest. “You mean Gorthak the Even-Handed? The bard? The one who plays the flute?”

Thorgar froze. “…Aye?”

The orc leader howled with laughter. “That’s my brother!”

Thorgar blinked. “Yer jokin’.”

Another orc grinned, nudging Thorgar with his elbow. “Hah! That’s rich! You’re tryin’ to scare us off with stories about our own kin!”

The leader wiped his eyes. “Oh, by Gruumsh’s one good eye, I needed this today. Gorthak—killer of armies? The only thing that fool’s ever killed is the mood when he starts singin’ about lost loves!”

Thorgar sighed, rubbing his forehead. “Aye, well… he’s got a dramatic way about him.”

The orcs chuckled, shaking their heads.

“So what’s a dwarf like you doin’ out here anyway?” the leader asked.

“Travelin’. Writin’. Drinkin’ fine ale.”

One of the orcs tilted his head. “Drinkin’ fine ale, eh?”

Thorgar nodded. “Aye. Just revived an ancient dwarven brew, in fact. Sold a full keg to the Stone Hearth Inn.”

The orcs exchanged glances.

“…Stone Hearth?” the leader said. “That’s not far. We could be there by nightfall.”

One of the others grinned. “Reckon we should go see what our dear bard-brother’s friend has been up to?”

The leader grinned back. “Aye. But first—” he stepped aside, motioning to the road ahead. “You go on, dwarf. You’ve given us the best laugh we’ve had in weeks.”

Thorgar nodded, stepping forward. “Appreciate it, lads.”

As he passed, one of the orcs chuckled. “Next time you try bluffin’ yer way out of a fight, lad—maybe pick a more dangerous orc.”

Thorgar grinned. “Aye… noted.”

And with that, he set off down the road once more, shaking his head, chuckling to himself.

Gorthak had a lot to answer for.

Thorgar walked for hours, the rolling hills giving way to a well-worn trade route. The sun hung high overhead, casting long shadows from passing caravans and lonely trees bent by the wind. His boots kicked up dust as he followed the road, his mind still replaying the encounter with the orcs who nearly robbed him—only to turn into drinking companions thanks to Gorthak’s ridiculous reputation.

He chuckled to himself. “Damn bard’s got his name everywhere.”

But as the day stretched on, a new sight caught his eye.

Up ahead, at the side of the road, a traveling forge had been set up beneath a massive oak tree. Smoke curled from a portable bellows, and a hammer clanged against metal in rhythmic

beats. Sparks flew, dancing in the midday sun as the blacksmith—a tall, muscular half-elf with soot-streaked skin—worked a glowing horseshoe over the coals.

Something was off, though. The blacksmith was working over a flat stone, rather than an anvil.

Thorgar furrowed his brows. A forge without an anvil? That was like a tavern without ale. A tragedy.

He approached, clearing his throat. “Oi, smith! Ye seem to be workin’ at a disadvantage.”

The half-elf looked up, pushing sweaty hair out of his face. His sharp green eyes flicked over Thorgar, then he sighed, shaking his head.

“Aye, you could say that,” he muttered, tossing the hammer down onto the stone. “Name’s Rendan Ironshade. And if you’re here to buy something, you’ll have to wait until I can actually make something worth selling.”

Thorgar crossed his arms. “Anvil gone missin’, has it?”

Rendan grunted. “Fell right off my cart somewhere along this cursed road. I didn’t notice until I set up camp.”

Thorgar glanced at the forge. Tools, tongs, hammers—everything was in place except the one thing a blacksmith needed most.

Rendan continued, frustration heavy in his voice. “I can’t leave the forge unattended, or I risk losing my fire. But I can’t do proper work without an anvil. So here I am, hammering steel against a damned rock.” He shook his head. “It’s a sad sight, I know.”

Thorgar scratched his beard. Tracking down a lost anvil wouldn’t be easy—it was a massive hunk of metal, sure, but anyone who found it would know it was valuable.

“Any idea where ye lost it?” Thorgar asked.

Rendan sighed. “Somewhere between here and Brimstone Crossing. That’s half a day’s walk back.”

Thorgar glanced up the road, then shrugged. “Ain’t the strangest thing I’ve looked for.”

The blacksmith raised an eyebrow. “You’re saying you’ll track it down?”

Thorgar smiled. “Aye. Can’t stand to see a forge in distress.”

Rendan clapped him on the shoulder, grinning. “If you bring it back, I’ll forge you a tool or weapon of your choice. That’s a promise.”

Thorgar nodded, adjusting his pack. A masterwork weapon from a skilled smith? That was worth chasing down a missing chunk of metal.

Thorgar set off, retracing the blacksmith's path. The road was wide and well-traveled, with deep cart tracks marking the dirt. He kept his eyes on the ground, looking for signs of something heavy being dragged—or dropped.

After an hour, he reached a small roadside camp, where a group of merchants had stopped for a meal. He approached the fire, where an older human was roasting a skewer of rabbit over the flames.

"Oi," Thorgar called. "Either of ye lot seen an anvil on the road?"

The merchant raised an eyebrow. "An anvil?"

"Aye. Big metal block, real heavy, hard to miss."

One of the younger traders snorted. "Hah! Oh, I saw it. Just up the road."

Thorgar narrowed his eyes. "And where'd it go?"

The man chuckled. "Well… a gnome took it."

Thorgar groaned. "Of course it was a gnome."

The older merchant nodded. "Aye, little fella with a crazy look in his eyes. Said it 'spoke' to him."

Thorgar blinked. "…The anvil spoke to him?"

The young merchant grinned. "That's what he said! Called it 'The Titan's Seat' or something dramatic like that."

Thorgar pinched the bridge of his nose. "Where'd he go?"

The old merchant pointed up the road. "Last I saw, he was hauling it toward the old windmill ruins. Said he had 'big plans' for it."

Thorgar muttered under his breath. "If this is Tobren again, I swear on me beard…"

With a sigh, he thanked the merchants and followed the road toward the windmill ruins.

The ruins of the old windmill were barely more than a few crumbling stone walls and a half-broken wooden frame. And sitting in the middle of it was…

A gnome.

A wild-haired, soot-smudged, wide-eyed gnome in goggles, standing proudly next to the missing anvil.

"AHA! A VISITOR TO MY DOMAIN!" the gnome shouted, throwing his arms wide.

Thorgar stared at him. "Lad, that ain't yer domain. That's an anvil. And it ain't yers either."

The gnome gasps, dramatically clutching his chest. “How dare you! This is no mere anvil! This is THE TITAN’S SEAT! A relic of immense power! A cornerstone of my greatest invention yet!”

Thorgar sighed. “And what invention might that be?”

The gnome gestured wildly. “Behold! The Sky Hammer!”

Thorgar squinted. “I see an anvil.”

The gnome grinned. “YES. But soon, it will be a catapult.”

Thorgar stared. “…Yer gonna launch an anvil. Into the sky.”

The gnome nodded enthusiastically.

Thorgar exhaled through his nose. “Lad, I need that anvil back.”

The gnome frowned. “But—but my Sky Hammer!”

“I’ll tell ye what,” Thorgar said, crossing his arms. “I’ll buy it off ye.”

The gnome perked up. “Go on…”

Thorgar dug into his coin pouch. “I’ll give ye 20 gold and a fine set of tinker’s tools for it.”

The gnome tapped his chin, considering. “…Deal.”

With a firm handshake, the gnome happily took the gold, muttering about funding his ‘next project.’ Thorgar sighed in relief and loaded the Titan’s Seat onto a wooden cart.

Now, he just had to haul the damn thing back.

By nightfall, Thorgar returned to Rendan’s forge, his back aching from the effort.

The blacksmith grinned wide. “You actually found it?”

“Aye,” Thorgar said, wiping sweat from his brow. “And I had to out-negotiate a lunatic gnome to get it back.”

Rendan chuckled. “Well, a deal’s a deal. What’ll you have, dwarf?”

Thorgar stroked his beard. “Make me a fine hand axe. Good steel, well-balanced. Something to last.”

Rendan nodded. “Aye. That, I can do.”

As the forge fire roared back to life, Thorgar leaned against a barrel, watching the smith work, a satisfied smile on his face.

Another day, another adventure.

The forge fire burned hot as Rendan Ironshade worked, hammering the finishing touches onto the hand axe promised to Thorgar. The dwarf watched with quiet appreciation—there was something deeply satisfying about seeing good steel shaped by strong hands.

At last, Rendan stepped back, admiring his work. He lifted the axe and offered it to Thorgar. Its steel blade gleamed, freshly sharpened, and its handle was sturdy oak wrapped in leather. A weapon built to last.

“Here she is,” Rendan said with a smile. “Balanced, razor-sharp, and forged to stand the test of time. Should serve you well, Stonequill.”

Thorgar took the axe and gave it a few testing swings. The weight was perfect—heavy enough to bite, light enough to wield swiftly. He nodded in approval. “Aye, this is fine work. Ye’ve got my thanks, lad.”

“And you have mine,” Rendan replied. “I’d be cursing the gods if I had to keep hammering steel on a rock. Thanks for tracking the anvil down.”

With a firm handshake, the two parted ways, and Thorgar took to the road once more.

After a few hours of walking, the sky had begun to darken, a deep blue swallowing the last rays of the sun. Finding a small clearing near the road, Thorgar set up a simple camp. He gathered wood, built a fire, and cooked himself a meal—bread, dried meat, and a few mushrooms left over from his last forage.

As he ate, he pulled out his journal and dipped his quill in ink. The firelight flickered against the pages as he wrote.

“The ale flowed well at the Stone Hearth Inn—perhaps a bit too well. Woke up with a head like a hammer on steel, but worth every drop.

Retrieved a smith’s lost anvil. A damn gnome had it, called it ‘The Titan’s Seat.’ Nearly tried to launch it into the sky. May the gods have mercy on whoever gives that one more coin for his inventions.”

“Traded the anvil for steel—Rendan Ironshade’s axe is fine work. Let’s hope I won’t be needin’ it too soon.”

Thorgar smiled to himself, closing the book and leaning back against a tree, letting the warmth of the fire settle in his bones. His eyelids grew heavy as he listened to the crackle of burning wood and the distant chirping of night insects.

Then—a rustle in the bushes.

His eyes snapped open.

A sniffing sound, low and cautious. Then another. Leaves stirred, twigs cracked.

Thorgar slowly reached for his sword.

A blur of gray fur shot from the brush, teeth bared, eyes wild with hunger. Thorgar held his ground, raising a steady hand.

“Easy, lad,” he murmured, voice calm but firm. “Ain’t lookin’ to fight ye. Go find easier prey.”

For a moment, the wolf hesitated. Its snarling lessened, ears twitching, its yellow eyes locking onto Thorgar’s.

Then—something changed.

The beast shook violently, its lips pulling back into a deeper snarl, eyes rolling madly.

Then it lunged.

Thorgar twisted aside, barely dodging the snapping jaws. He drew his sword in a flash, bracing himself as the wolf circled back, growling, foam dripping from its fangs.

“Damn thing’s sick,” he muttered. No reasoning with a beast gone mad.

The wolf leapt again.

This time, Thorgar was ready.

With a swift motion, he sidestepped and swung—his blade cutting clean through fur and flesh. The wolf hit the ground hard, its growl turning to a weak whimper before falling silent.

Thorgar let out a breath, glancing around the dark forest, ears sharp for any more movement.

None came.

Still, he slept with one eye open, sword within reach, fire burning low.

By morning, Thorgar packed his things and set out again.

The road stretched ahead, winding through hills and scattered woodlands. The air grew warmer, the smell of smoke and stone drifting in on the wind.

By midday, he saw it.

Durgul’Um.

A middle-sized city, built into the side of a low mountain, its walls of dark stone rising high. The entrance was marked by massive iron gates, open to the steady flow of merchants, travelers, and cityfolk going about their day.

The streets bustled with life.

Dwarves, humans, elves, halflings, even a few orcs—all moving through the wide market squares, bargaining, shouting, laughing.

A blacksmith's hammer rang from a nearby forge. A group of elves in fine robes gathered around a stall selling rare enchanted trinkets. A halfling street performer juggled flaming torches, drawing cheers from a small crowd.

A cart overflowing with fresh fruits nearly ran over a gnome, who shouted a string of curses before darting into an alleyway.

The smell of roasted meat, baking bread, and spiced ale filled the air.

Taverns lined the main road, their wooden signs swaying gently in the breeze. The biggest among them, The Copper Anvil, had an open-air patio where dwarves were already drinking despite the early hour.

Thorgar smiled.

Durgul'Um was alive with the hum of industry, trade, and good-natured shouting. Thorgar moved through the streets at an easy pace, his keen eyes scanning the city's mix of stone buildings, timber-framed shops, and old dwarven structures built directly into the mountainside.

He had no real destination in mind—just a wanderer in a new place, letting the city tell its own story.

After some time, he found himself near a particularly old building, its weathered stone facade carved with intricate dwarven runes. A beard-shaped sigil was etched above the doorway, marking it as a place of significance to dwarves.

Outside stood a stout, elderly dwarf, arms crossed, brow furrowed, his long white beard slightly more disheveled than one might expect from a proper dwarf.

Thorgar, always up for a chat, approached with a nod. "Looks like something's weighin' on ye, elder."

The old dwarf sighed, shaking his head. "Aye, lad. Something's weighin' on all of us. This here is the Hall of the Dwarven Beard Society. Or it was… before disaster struck."

Thorgar raised an eyebrow. "Disaster?"

The old dwarf lowered his voice, glancing around as if fearful of being overheard.

"The Silver Comb is gone."

Thorgar blinked. "The… what now?"

"The Silver Comb of Groomlak Ironchin!" the dwarf said, eyes widening. "A sacred relic of dwarvenkind, passed down for generations! A comb said to bring luck, strength, and unparalleled beard luster to any who use it!"

Thorgar scratched his own beard. “Aye? And what does it do exactly?”

“Makes beards stronger. Makes the hairs shine like polished silver. Brings good fortune to those who wield it. But most importantly—” the old dwarf’s voice grew grave—“it maintains order.”

Thorgar folded his arms. “How d’ye mean?”

The elder gestured toward the dwarves inside the hall, all of whom looked distinctly more unkempt than usual. Beards frizzed, some tangled, a few lacking their usual braids.

“The Dwarven Beard Society thrives on well-groomed excellence, lad,” the elder said. “But now, without the Silver Comb, morale has plummeted. Confidence is shattered! The local merchants say trade is slower, taverns are quieter, and—” he lowered his voice to a whisper —“some dwarves have even… trimmed their beards poorly.”

Thorgar let out a low whistle. “By Moradin’s hammer… that bad, is it?”

“Aye,” the elder said darkly. “And worst of all—it was stolen.”

Thorgar grunted. “Any suspects?”

The elder stroked his wild beard. “Well… there was a halfling barber, came through a few days ago. Talking about wanting to test ‘new methods’ on dwarven beards. Some say he was asking strange questions about the Silver Comb.”

Thorgar rubbed his chin. “So ye think he took it?”

“I don’t know,” the elder admitted. “But someone did. And we need that comb back, lad.”

Thorgar cracked his knuckles. “Alright, then. I’ll track it down. Any idea where this barber went?”

The elder nodded. “He was last seen in his barbers shop. If he’s sellin’ or testing beard magic, someone down there will know.”

Thorgar smiled. “Sounds like a fine way to spend an afternoon.”

The elder gripped his arm. “Bring back the Silver Comb, and the dwarves of Durgul’Um will owe ye a great debt.”

“Aye,” Thorgar said. “And maybe I’ll get a fine ornament for me own beard out of it.”

Thorgar made his way through the bustling streets of Durgul’Um, pushing past merchants, street performers, and drunken dwarves already deep into their tankards. His destination was The Twisted Curl—a well-known halfling barbershop near the market square, where every smallfolk in the city went to get their curls, whiskers, and beards trimmed to perfection.

The shop itself was a cozy little stone building, its windows lined with jars of exotic beard oils and tiny scissors gleaming in the light. A wooden sign hung above the door, painted with a cheery-looking halfling twirling his curly mustache.

Thorgar stepped inside, ducking slightly to fit through the halfling-sized doorway. The scent of lavender and warm soap filled the air, mixing with the quiet *snip-snip* of scissors at work. A handful of halflings sat in padded chairs, having their whiskers styled by tiny, skilled hands.

As soon as he entered, every halfling in the room stopped talking. The barbers froze mid-trim, and the customers glanced at each other nervously.

Thorgar folded his arms, looking around. "Right. I'm lookin' for a certain barber. One who's got a thing for dwarven beards… and may have taken somethin' that don't belong to him."

A stout little halfling with gold-rimmed glasses—probably the shop's owner—cleared his throat and stepped forward. "Ah, sir, we provide only the finest grooming services here! If you're looking for a trim, we'd be happy to—"

Thorgar raised a hand. "Save it. I want to know where he is. The thief. Ye all know who I mean."

Silence.

The halflings glanced at each other—then suddenly, they all went back to their business.

One picked up a broom and started sweeping.
Another pretended to inspect a jar of beard oil.
A barber whistled innocently as he resumed trimming a customer's mustache.

Thorgar's eye twitched.

"Ah. Playin' dumb, are we?" He cracked his knuckles. "Fine. If words won't do it… I'll ask the hard way."

Before anyone could react, Thorgar lunged forward, grabbed the nearest halfling by the collar, and lifted him off the ground like a sack of flour.

"OI! OI! Put me down!" the little fellow kicked his tiny legs in the air.

Thorgar gave him a shake. "Where. Is. The. Barber?"

"I dunno! I dunno!" the halfling squeaked.

Thorgar narrowed his eyes. "Wrong answer."

He hauled the halfling up to eye level, shaking him again. "I'll start braidin' yer ears if ye don't talk."

“Alright! Alright!” the halfling yelped. “He ain’t here, I swear! He went—*uhh*—he went to the underground market! Said he had ‘business’ down there!”

Thorgar lowered him slightly. “What kind of business?”

“I dunno! Maybe sellin’ the comb? Maybe testin’ it on some fool?!”

Thorgar held him there for a second longer, then dropped him.

The halfling landed with a grunt, brushing himself off. “Bloody dwarves… never met one with patience.”

Thorgar grinned. “Patience is for elves. Thanks for the tip, lads.”

And with that, he turned on his heel and stomped out the door, leaving the barbershop in stunned silence.

The Underground Market of Durgul’Um wasn’t on any map. It was tucked beneath the city, in an old network of tunnels once used for smuggling, now home to a thriving black market of rare goods, stolen wares, and things best left unmentioned.

Thorgar descended a narrow stairway between two warehouses, past a grizzled dwarf guard who gave him a knowing nod. The deeper he went, the cooler the air became, thick with the scent of damp stone, burnt spices, and candle smoke.

Then, the tunnel opened up into a vast underground chamber—rows of stalls packed with exotic wares, shady merchants calling out deals, and buyers haggling over everything from enchanted weapons to illegal contraband.

Thorgar scanned the crowd.

Then he saw him.

At a stall near the far end of the market, a halfling in a fine green waistcoat stood on a crate, holding something silver in his hands, showing it off to a small audience of interested buyers.

“Ah, my friends! Feast your eyes upon the most legendary grooming artifact in all of dwarven history! The Silver Comb of Groomlak Ironchin! Said to grant good fortune and a shine like moonlight upon your very beard! Now, who among you has the gold to—”

Thorgar cleared his throat loudly.

The halfling froze mid-sentence, slowly looking up.

Thorgar folded his arms. “That don’t belong to ye, lad.”

The halfling gulped.

The buyers looked between them, sensing trouble, and quickly backed away.

Thorgar took a slow step forward. “Now, we can do this the easy way…” He cracked his knuckles. “Or we can do it my way.”

The halfling visibly considered his options.

Then, suddenly—he grabbed the comb and ran.

Thorgar sighed.

“Always the hard way.”

And with that, he gave chase.

The chase began with a blur of short legs and pure desperation.

Kip, the thieving halfling barber, darted through the underground market like a rat in a granary, the Silver Comb clutched tightly in his hands. His tiny feet barely made a sound as he leaped over crates, slid under tables, and wove through gaps between merchants and their wares.

Thorgar, on the other hand, was built for power, not speed.

He thundered after the halfling, boots slamming against the stone floor, but the heavy backpack on his shoulders slowed him down. The pots and pans strapped to his pack clattered with every step, turning him into a one-man traveling kitchen.

“Damn thief!” Thorgar bellowed, pushing aside a confused elven spice merchant.

Kip looked back with a grin, realizing he had the advantage. "Too slow, beardy!"

Then, with an infuriating little laugh, the halfling grabbed a chair from a nearby stall and tossed it directly into Thorgar’s path.

“Oh, ye little—!”

Thorgar barely had time to react. He jumped over the first chair, but Kip was already flipping another table behind him.

The dwarf crashed into it, scattering wooden cups and half-eaten food everywhere.

“GODS DAMN IT!”

He scrambled to his feet and charged forward, knocking a chair aside just as Kip slid under another merchant’s stall, his tiny hands grabbing a fresh loaf of bread as he passed.

He took a bite mid-sprint.

Thorgar's eye twitched. “ARE YE SERIOUSLY HAVIN’ A SNACK RIGHT NOW?!”

Kip laughed through a mouthful of bread, then suddenly grabbed a potted plant from a shop's display and hurled it behind him.

The pot shattered against the stone floor.

Thorgar didn't slow down.

Then his boot hit the loose dirt.

His legs flew out from under him.

And with a glorious, undignified crash, he slammed full-face into the ground, his backpack smashing into him with the force of a falling anvil.

The clattering of pots and pans echoed through the market.

Thorgar groaned, lifting his face from the cold stone. Blood dripped from his nose. His entire body ached. His pride was in ruins.

He took a deep, ragged breath… then let loose a string of curses that would have made an orc blush.

"YA ROTTEN, BEADY-EYED, SHRIMP-SIZED SON OF A FLEA-INFESTED GOAT!"

Kip, still running, cackled like a madman. "Almost lost me there, big guy!"

Thorgar, face twisted in rage, shoved himself up and stormed after him.

Kip zigzagged through the last stretch of the market before ducking into a side alley, grinning —only to skid to a stop.

A solid stone wall loomed ahead.

Dead end.

His grin vanished.

A moment later, Thorgar rounded the corner, breathing heavily, beard wild, eyes full of fire.

Kip took one look at him and squeaked.

Thorgar pointed a shaking, bloodied finger at him.

"Hand over the comb, or I swear on me ancestors, I'll COMB YE BALD WITH IT!"

Kip, realizing his life choices had led him to this exact terrifying moment, frantically held out the comb.

"A-alright! ALRIGHT! No need to go mad with grooming!"

Thorgar snatched the comb from his trembling hands, inspecting it. The fine silver teeth gleamed in the dim light, still perfect.

Satisfied, he glared down at the halfling. “Ye got some nerve, lad. Stealin’ a relic from DWARVES? What in the nine hells were ye thinkin’?”

Kip gulped. “Honestly? I thought it’d make me rich.”

Thorgar responded by slapping him on the back of the head.

“Ow!” Kip yelped. “What was that for?!”

“For bein’ an idiot.”

Kip rubbed his head. “Look, uh… to make it up to you, how about a free haircut at me shop?”

Thorgar glared. “Yer lucky I don’t let the Beard Society trim yer ears off.”

Then, with a grunt, he picked Kip up by the collar and slung him under one arm.

“Oi! What’re ye doin’?!” the halfling squeaked.

“Takin’ ye to yer new job.”

The Hall of the Dwarven Beard Society was packed when Thorgar kicked the door open and stomped in, a squirming Kip still tucked under his arm.

The elder dwarf raised an eyebrow. “Stonequill. That was fast.”

Thorgar grinned and dropped Kip onto the floor.

“Yer thief, as promised.”

Kip sat up, dusting himself off. “Alright, alright! No need to make a scene…”

The elder frowned down at the halfling. “Stealin’ from dwarves. Lad, ye might be the dumbest rogue I’ve ever seen.”

Kip shrugged. “I’ll take ‘bold and ambitious.’”

The elder sighed. “Lucky for ye, we’re more interested in teachin’ lessons than breakin’ bones.” He leaned forward, a smile creeping across his face.

“So here’s what’s gonna happen. Yer gonna work here. For a year. For free. Helpin’ us with beard maintenance, learnin’ proper dwarven grooming, and repayin’ yer debt.”

Kip’s jaw dropped. “A YEAR?!”

Thorgar grinned. “Think of it as expandin’ yer barberin’ skills.”

Kip groaned. “I should’ve just stolen gold…”

The elder turned back to Thorgar. “And you, lad—you’ve done us a great service. As promised, yer reward.”

He handed Thorgar a heavy pouch, filled to the brim with silver coins.

“1000 silver, well-earned.”

Thorgar weighed the pouch in his hand, smiling. “Aye. That’ll buy me a few good drinks.”

Kip grumbled from the floor. “Not for me, I suppose.”

Thorgar patted him on the head. “Cheer up, lad. At least we didn’t shave ye.”

And with that, he turned and left, his coin purse heavier, his beard gleaming in victory.

With a pouch full of silver and a victorious gleam in his eye, Thorgar made his way to the Goofy Goose Tavern.

The Goofy Goose was one of Durgul’Um’s livelier drinking halls, known for its loud music, strong ale, and questionable decision-making. The sign above the door depicted a goose wearing a battered helmet, mid-honk, as if squawking angrily at the world.

“Aye, this’ll do nicely,” Thorgar muttered, stepping inside.

The warm glow of lanterns flickered off the wooden beams, the smell of roasted meat and spilled ale filling the air. The tavern was packed—dwarves, humans, a few elves, even an orc or two gathered around long tables, singing, laughing, and swapping stories.

Thorgar made a direct march to the bar, slamming a few silver pieces down.

“Four of yer strongest, and fast!”

The barkeep, a broad-shouldered woman with a thick braid and sharper eyes than a hawk, grinned. “Four, huh? Got a long night ahead?”

“Aye, and I intend to make it count,” Thorgar said with a toothy smile.

The first mug hit the table. Then the second. Then the third.

By the fourth, Thorgar was leaning back in his chair, thoroughly pleased with himself.

That was when he caught the eye of a nearby bard.

The bard, a tall, lanky half-elf in a deep blue coat, twirled a silver coin between his fingers. His eyes gleamed with mischief as he approached.

“Well now, friend, I’ve been watching, and you drink like a man who enjoys a challenge.”

Thorgar raised an eyebrow. “Ye offering one?”

The bard grinned. “Aye. I’ll bet you can’t out-drink everyone here while still remembering every detail of the night.”

Thorgar chuckled. “Oh, lad. I’ve had me share of strong drink, but I’ve got the memory of a stone tablet.”

The bard leaned in. “Then let’s see if you can prove it.”

With that, the challenge began.

Mugs clanked, ale flowed freely, and soon a whole crowd gathered to watch. Tankard after tankard, Thorgar and the bard drank, matching each other round for round.

The bard began to sway after the seventh mug. Ale was flowing freely for the crowd as they watched.

By the ninth, he was slurring songs that only half-rhymed.

By the twelfth, the bard had to brace himself against the table, blinking in slow confusion.

Meanwhile, Thorgar? Still upright. Still sharp.

“Ahhh, I hate to admit it, but I think… you… might’ve won, friend.” the bard said, struggling to keep his head from falling forward.

Thorgar grinned. “Told ye. Dwarven memory’s as strong as dwarven ale.”

But the bard, though on the edge of unconsciousness, wasn’t done yet.

“Alright then, Stonequill, answer me this.”

The bard sat up with sudden focus, his eyes sharpening despite the drunken fog.

“What song did the minstrels play two rounds ago?”

“Easy. ‘The Ballad of Drunken Gary.’ And the fella in the corner botched the chorus.”

The bard snapped his fingers. “Alright, alright. What color was the elf’s cloak who sat behind me an hour ago?”

“Green, stitched with silver leaves. And he spilled his wine.”

The bard leaned forward. “How many mugs did the barmaid carry at once?”

“Six. One under her elbow. A fine display of balance.”

The bard groaned, rubbing his temples. “By the gods, lad, do ye forget *anything*?”

Thorgar laughed, leaning back triumphantly. “Not a damn thing.”

Then the bard grinned slyly.

“Alright then, last question. Who paid for all the drinks?”

Thorgar froze.

A sudden, horrible silence fell over him.

Slowly, he turned toward the barkeep.

The barkeep smiled, arms folded. Then she simply pointed at Thorgar.

“…Oh, piss.”

The bard burst into drunken laughter, slamming the table with both hands.

“Oh-ho! I may have lost the drinking bet, but YOU lost yer coin purse, my friend!”

Thorgar quickly checked his pouch—sure enough, it was noticeably lighter.

He sighed, rubbing his temples.

The bard, wiping a tear from his eye, clapped him on the back. “Well fought, my stout friend! And hey, ye might be broke now, but at least ye’ll remember every detail of how ye lost yer gold.”

Thorgar grumbled. “Aye. Lesson learned.”

He finished off the last of his drink, now a little less triumphant than before.

Gnomes and their machines

Thorgar tipped back his mug, finishing the last drops of ale with a satisfied sigh. Despite the unfortunate loss of his coin purse, the night had been lively, and he had no regrets—except, perhaps, for the aching weight in his belly from too much beer.

He was just about to stand up and leave when a small voice piped up beside him.

“Excuse me, sir! You look like a dwarf who can run.”

Thorgar turned his head slowly, already suspicious.

Standing beside his table was a gnome with wild, frizzled white hair, round brass goggles perched on his forehead, and a waistcoat covered in ink stains and soot. He was clutching a large wrench in one hand and a torn scrap of parchment in the other.

“I don’t like where this is going,” Thorgar muttered, setting his mug down.

The gnome smiled sheepishly and cleared his throat.

“Right! The name’s Quibble Nockwhistle, esteemed inventor, problem solver, and—er—creator of things that occasionally get a little… unpredictable.”

Thorgar folded his arms. “Aye, that sounds about right. What’ve ye done?”

Quibble grimaced. “Well, you see, I built a marvel of modern convenience—a clockwork messenger! A brilliant automaton designed to deliver letters across town in record time! It was supposed to be my greatest achievement!”

Thorgar raised an eyebrow. “‘Supposed to be’?”

Quibble coughed. “Er. It… um… ran off.”

Thorgar sighed, rubbing his temples. “Of course it did.”

Quibble frantically explained that his clockwork courier—a small, brass-plated automaton with spindly legs, a mail slot for a mouth, and a little chimney that puffed steam when it ran—had, for reasons unknown, gone completely mad.

Instead of delivering messages, it was now throwing letters into fountains. Knocking over market stalls. Yelling Dwarvish poetry at innocent bystanders.

“It’s a masterpiece! But also, possibly, a crime against public safety!” Quibble exclaimed, wringing his hands. “I need you to catch it before the city guard arrests me for public nuisance… again.”

Thorgar sighed deeply and stood up from his chair.

“So let me get this straight. Ye built a messenger, and instead of carryin’ letters, it’s out there screamin’ poetry and causin’ chaos?”

Quibble nodded rapidly. “That about sums it up, yes.”

Thorgar cracked his knuckles. “Alright. Let’s go catch a runaway metal goblin.”

And with that, they hurried out into the night, chasing after a rogue machine with a passion for verse.

The streets of Durgul’Um were quiet at this hour, save for the occasional drunken dwarf stumbling home from the taverns. The lanterns flickered along the stone-paved roads, casting long shadows across the marketplace.

And somewhere in those shadows… a small brass-plated menace was causing havoc.

Thorgar and Quibble hurried down the street, boots clanking against the cobblestones. The gnome was panting from exertion, waving his torn parchment wildly.

“It should be nearby! I built it with a homing mechanism—”

Before he could finish, a loud metallic voice echoed from the plaza ahead.

“OH WOE, OH SORROW!”

Thorgar froze in his tracks.

Quibble paled. “Oh no. It’s reciting again.”

“THE WIND BLOWS COLD, THE ALE GROWS WARM!”

BANG! A crash of wood and metal rang out. A merchant yelled in distress.

“BY MORADIN, WHAT IN THE HELLS WAS THAT?!” Thorgar barked.

Quibble gulped. “I think it just toppled a fruit stand.”

Thorgar gritted his teeth. “Lad, if this thing spills one more drink or ruins one more meal, yer gonna be buildin’ yerself a new set of teeth.”

Then—movement!

From the shadows of a nearby alley, a small brass machine burst into the street, its spindly metal legs clanking as it ran. Letters spilled from its open mouth-slot, fluttering through the air like autumn leaves. Steam puffed wildly from the little chimney on its back.

It paused mid-stride, scanning its surroundings with two glassy eyes that flickered like candlelight.

Then it turned to face Thorgar.

“A DWARF WITH A BEARD SO MIGHTY AND GRAND, YET DOOMED TO CHASE WITH HEAVY HAND!”

Thorgar blinked.

Then scowled.

“Oh, it’s DEAD.”

The clockwork courier took off running again.

“AFTER IT!” Quibble shouted.

The mechanical courier was fast. It darted through the market square, leaping over barrels and slipping between carts like a greased goblin.

Thorgar charged after it, but his heavy backpack slowed him down, pots and pans clanging noisily.

“GET BACK HERE, YE RUSTED LUMP OF NONSENSE!” he roared.

The automaton ignored him.

Instead, it leapt onto a stack of wooden crates and spun in a dramatic pirouette before landing on a merchant’s table full of fresh fish.

SPLAT! Fish went flying. The merchant howled in outrage.

“THAT THING JUST KICKED A TROUT INTO ME SOUP!”

Thorgar growled, pushing forward—but just as he reached the stall, the courier kicked a basket of apples onto the ground.

Dozens of apples rolled under Thorgar’s feet.

His boot hit one.

Then another.

Then he stepped on one and almost fell, moving in and out of balance crashing his shoulder in a wall.

Quibble winced. “Ooooh. That looked like it hurt.”

From somewhere ahead, the courier let out a triumphant burst of steam.

“THE DWARF HAS FALLEN, BUT I AM FREE! LET LINES OF VERSE BE SUNG OF ME!”

Thorgar lifted his head from the ground, nostrils flaring.

“…I am gonna MELT YE INTO A SOUP POT.”

The pursuit continued through the winding alleys, until at last, the clockwork courier turned into a narrow passageway—only to find a stack of crates blocking its way.

It skidded to a halt, gears clicking rapidly.

It spun around—only to see Thorgar standing at the entrance, panting, fists clenched, eyes burning with the rage of a dwarf who had fallen in public.

The automaton tilted its head.

Then, in a mechanical voice, it tried one last trick.

“FINE DWARF, MIGHT I PLEAD MY CASE? PERHAPS FORGIVENESS I MAY EMBRACE?”

Thorgar drew his axe.

“No.”

He lunged forward.

The clockwork courier shrieked in alarm.

“EEE! A POET’S END IS COLD AND CRUEL! I SEE NOW I WAS BUT A FOOL!”

With a single, well-placed swing, Thorgar hooked his axe under the machine’s frame, flipping it onto its back. It squirmed, gears clicking, legs twitching helplessly.

Quibble rushed forward, wrench in hand, and quickly unscrewed a small panel on the courier’s side. With a few twists and turns, the machine let out one last puff of steam… then fell silent.

Quibble sighed in relief. “Alright! Crisis averted!”

Thorgar crossed his arms. “Yer definition of ‘crisis’ is a lot different from mine.”

Quibble grinned. “Well, at least no one died! That’s a win, right?”

Behind them, the fish merchant held up a trout covered in soup. “I BEG TO DIFFER.”

Thorgar sighed. “Let’s just get this damned thing back to yer shop.”

Back at Quibble’s workshop, the gnome carefully set the broken courier on his workbench.

“I can fix it! Probably. Maybe. Should take a week or two.” He paused, rubbing his chin. “Might need a new poetry function, though.”

“Or none at all,” Thorgar muttered.

Quibble chuckled, then reached into a small chest and pulled out a strange brass gadget.

“For your trouble! A little invention of mine—press the button, and it lets out a loud, high-pitched whistle. Great for distracting people or confusing animals!”

Thorgar took the trinket, turning it over in his hands. “Aye. I’ll find a use for it.”

Quibble grinned. “And if you ever need a mechanical masterpiece built, come see me! I promise my next invention will be less… excitable.”

Thorgar grunted. “Lad, if I see one more of yer inventions runnin’ wild, I’m throwing it into the nearest forge.”

With his new gadget in hand, Thorgar nodded and left, ready for whatever trouble the city had in store next.

As Thorgar left Quibble’s workshop, he rolled his shoulders, wincing slightly from the chase. His shoulder ached from the hit, and his boots still smelled faintly of crushed apples.

He muttered under his breath, dragging a hand down his face.

“No more gnomes. No more blasted machines. I swear it on me beard.”

With that oath made, he marched straight to the nearest tavern, sat himself down, and drank until the memories of gears, steam, and Dwarvish poetry faded into the night.

When sleep finally claimed him, it came deep and dreamless.

Thorgar woke with a grunt, the soft glow of morning light slipping through the wooden shutters. He stretched, rolling his neck, and reached for his journal, flipping it open to a fresh page.

Dipping his quill into ink, he scratched out his latest observations:

"The Lost Comb of the Dwarves—an artifact of grooming so revered that its absence nearly led to social collapse. Who knew a bit of silver and a few fine teeth could hold such power? The thief, Kip, learned his lesson, though I suspect he’ll be cursing beard maintenance for the rest of his days."

"And then there’s Quibble’s damned machine. A messenger turned menace, screaming poetry in the streets and flinging trout where trout had no business being. I tell myself I’ll steer clear of gnomes from now on… but fate has a way of laughing at such promises. We’ll see how long it lasts."

Satisfied with his notes, he closed the book and set it aside.

After a quick wash and stretch, Thorgar headed downstairs to the tavern’s common hall, where the scent of roasting pork, sizzling potatoes, and fresh-baked bread filled the air.

He settled in at a sturdy oak table and ordered a proper dwarven breakfast—a thick slab of pork belly, crispy potatoes fried with onions, and a tankard of morning ale.

The first bite was heaven—salty, savory, crisped to perfection. He ate slowly, savoring every mouthful, washing it down with deep pulls of ale.

Once full, he leaned back, pulled out his clay pipe, and stuffed it with rich Redvine leaf.

The first few puffs were smooth and spicy, curling lazily in the tavern air.

He sat like that for a while, watching the fire in the hearth, letting the warmth of the meal settle.

It was a damn fine morning.

Feeling rested and ready, Thorgar set out into the city, deciding to learn more about Durgul'Um's trade and guilds.

Wandering through the bustling streets, he made notes on each one he passed:

Weavers' Guild – A sprawling hall with great wooden looms visible through the open doors. Inside, dwarves and humans alike wove intricate patterns into cloth, from fine silk to sturdy wool. A banner outside boasted of "stronger-than-steel thread," though Thorgar had doubts.

Glassblowers' Guild – The heat from the furnaces could be felt even from the street. Inside, artisans worked delicate glass into flasks, goblets, and shimmering stained windows. Some experimented with enchanted glass, whispering spells into molten shapes before they cooled.

Goldsmiths' Guild – A grand building with polished brass doors, guarded by two stern-looking dwarves in gilded armor. The air inside smelled of hot metal and coin. Jewelry, signet rings, and fine inlays were their specialties, though rumor had it they also did work for less-than-reputable clients.

Smiths' Guild – The heart of dwarven craftsmanship, its walls blackened with soot and the ring of hammers filling the air. Every blade, nail, and horseshoe in the city likely passed through their hands. Inside, a forge roared constantly, its fire never allowed to go out.

Woodworkers' Guild – Tucked between stone buildings, the scent of freshly cut lumber filled the air. Carvers, furniture makers, and bowyers honed their craft here. Some of the most delicate dwarven runes, carved into old oak and ironwood, were said to come from these halls.

Stonemasons' Guild – A fortress of a guildhall, built entirely from the stone its members worked. The dwarves here were as solid as the blocks they shaped, overseeing every archway, tunnel, and foundation in Durgul'Um. They whispered of a great underground project in the works, though no outsider knew its true purpose.

Thorgar jotted down his notes in his journal:

"Durgul'Um is a city built on the sweat of its guilds. Each hall a kingdom of its own, run by masters who shape the world with their craft. The masons carve the bones, the smiths forge the steel, the weavers weave the flesh, and the goldsmiths dress it in finery. If a man seeks work, he'll find no shortage of it here—though the price of admission is skill, not silver."

Closing his journal, he took a deep breath, inhaling the scent of the bustling city.

He had learned much, but the question remained—what next?

Dispute

Thorgar had always felt at home in a smithy. The clang of hammers, the roar of the forge, the smell of hot metal and burning coal—these were comforting sounds to a dwarf.

So when he arrived at the Smiths' Guild Hall, he grinned at the sight before him.

The building itself was a fortress of blackened stone, its massive iron doors carved with the symbols of hammer and anvil. Inside, a roaring forge dominated the main hall, and dwarves toiled over red-hot steel, shaping weapons, armor, and tools with precision.

But despite the usual bustle of industry, something felt off.

Thorgar noticed the heated glares being exchanged between groups of blacksmiths muttering to themselves. A few were shaking their heads, cursing under their breath. The air hummed with tension, like an axe blade just before the swing.

Before he could ask what was going on, a gruff voice called out.

"You there—dwarf. You look like a man who knows steel from scrap. We got a problem that needs fixin'."

Thorgar turned to face the speaker—a broad-shouldered dwarf with arms thick as anvils, his beard braided with iron rings. He had the look of a master smith, his apron covered in burn marks and bits of metal shavings.

"Thorgar Stonequill," Thorgar said, offering a nod. "What's the trouble?"

The smith crossed his arms. "The trouble, lad, is them blasted gold-binders over at the Goldsmiths' Guild."

Thorgar raised an eyebrow. "What about 'em?"

Another blacksmith chimed in, scowling. "They're claimin' we been pilferin' their gold. Sayin' we're meltin' it down to inlay weapons and armor when it's supposed to be used for their precious jewelry."

The first smith spat onto the forge floor. "Bah! They're the ones hoardin' it! Stockpilin' ingots like dragons while we can't even gild a blade proper! Prices have tripled! And now we got rumors goin' 'round that it's gonna turn ugly at the next Guild Hall meetin'."

Thorgar stroked his beard, thinking.

"City Council ain't interferin'?"

"Oh, they're interferin' alright," the first smith grunted. "They sent word—they want someone to investigate before we start bashin' each other with hammers. They need someone neutral. Someone who knows craft, but don't owe either guild a favor."

The second smith smiled. “Aye. And someone who won’t get knocked out after the first punch.”

Thorgar chuckled. “I like ye’re faith in me.”

The first smith nodded. “If ye’re takin’ the job, ye’ll need to talk to both sides. Find out what’s really goin’ on before it turns into a brawl.”

Thorgar grinned. “Sounds like me kind of work. Who do I start with?”

Thorgar knew gold disputes were never simple. A bunch of dwarves arguing over metal was a tale as old as time itself. But this situation had an extra stink to it—someone was stirring the pot.

And if he was going to settle things, he had to start where the accusations began.

The Goldsmiths’ Guild Hall was a grand sight. Unlike the blackened stone and roaring fires of the Smiths’ Guild, this building was polished to perfection, its brass-trimmed doors shining like a freshly minted coin. Ornate pillars lined the entrance, each one carved with depictions of rings, necklaces, and gilded armor.

Thorgar grunted. “Puttin’ on a bit much, aren’t they?”

He stepped inside.

The air smelled of molten gold and polish, a sharp contrast to the iron and coal scent of the smithy. Inside, goldsmiths hunched over delicate projects, using tiny hammers and precision tools to set gemstones, engrave designs, and shape soft gold into masterpieces.

A tall, slender dwarf in rich blue robes approached, his beard neatly braided with golden clasps.

“You must be the investigator,” he said, looking Thorgar over with a slight wrinkle of his nose. “Stonequill, wasn’t it? I am Master Ornrik Gildemark, Head of the Goldsmiths' Guild. The City Council sent word of your… assistance.”

Thorgar folded his arms. “Aye. Ye lot are claimin’ the smiths have been pilferin’ gold that ought to be goin’ to yer fine little trinkets. That true?”

Ornrik sniffed. “We do not ‘claim’ anything, sir. The facts speak for themselves. Our shipments of raw gold have been arriving lighter than what we paid for. At first, we thought it was a mistake. But then we started seeing blacksmiths crafting swords, axes, and even armor with gold embellishments far beyond what their guild should be able to afford.”

Thorgar raised an eyebrow. “Ye sure they’re stealin’ it? Or could they be buyin’ it from somewhere else?”

Ornrik’s expression darkened. “The only legal source of gold in this city comes through our guild. If they’re getting it elsewhere, then they’re dealing with smugglers. Either way, they’re breaking guild law.”

Thorgar stroked his beard. “And what of yer own stockpiles? The smiths think ye’ve been hoardin’ and jackin’ up prices. Any truth to that?”

Ornrik stiffened. “Gold must be handled with care. If we restrict how much is released, it is only to ensure its value is maintained. Surely a dwarf of culture such as yourself understands the importance of balance.”

Thorgar grunted. “Aye, I understand a ‘balance’ that favors ye and leaves the rest of the folk chokin’ on scraps.”

Ornrik’s cheeks flushed red. “I assure you, we are doing no such thing. If you want proof, feel free to inspect our ledgers. Unlike certain soot-covered hammer-swingers, we keep records.”

Thorgar nodded. “I might just do that. But first, I need to follow up on somethin’ else.”

He turned to leave, but then paused.

“One last thing—ye got any idea who might be sellin’ gold on the side? A merchant dealin’ under the table?”

Ornrik hesitated. “We… have suspicions. There have been whispers about a trader named Bellwin Rasp, dealing in ‘special imports.’ But no one’s been able to catch him in the act.”

Thorgar smiled. “Then I reckon it’s time someone did.”

If there was gold moving in secret, then it had to be passing through the underground market.

Thorgar headed back to the lower quarters of the city, where the less reputable merchants operated. Here, smugglers, backdoor traders, and sellers of ‘acquired goods’ ran their businesses in the shadows.

It didn’t take long to find Bellwin Rasp.

The merchant was a thin, rat-faced human, dressed in fine but slightly worn silks. He sat behind a stall selling “exotic wares,” though Thorgar noticed that most of them looked suspiciously like stolen goods.

Thorgar strode up to the stall, cracking his knuckles.

“Ye Bellwin Rasp?”

The merchant looked up sharply, eyes darting around. “Depends on who’s asking.”

Thorgar leaned forward, dropping a heavy hand onto the table. “The dwarf who knows ye been sellin’ gold to both the smiths and the goldsmiths while tellin’ ‘em both lies.”

Bellwin visibly tensed. “That’s a serious accusation. I’m just a humble trader of fine metals.”

Thorgar grinned. “Aye? Then ye won’t mind explainin’ how a ‘humble trader’ got his hands on restricted guild gold?”

Bellwin licked his lips nervously. “I… may have acquired some excess stock. Through legitimate means.”

Thorgar snorted. “Right. And I may be the bloody King of Moradin’s Halls.”

The merchant glanced toward an alleyway, clearly considering escape.

Thorgar caught the look.

He slammed his fist down on the stall, knocking over a few trinkets. “Try runnin’, lad, and I’ll make sure every guild in this city knows yer name—and yer face—before sunset. Ye think the goldsmiths are angry now? Wait ‘til they hear who’s been bleedin’ them dry.”

Bellwin swallowed hard.

Then, with a nervous chuckle, he raised his hands in surrender. “Alright, alright! No need for threats! Look, it’s simple—I took a little off the top from the incoming shipments, sold it to the smiths cheap, then raised the price for the goldsmiths to make up the difference.”

Thorgar grunted. “And who else is in on it?”

Bellwin shifted uncomfortably. “Some of the goldsmith apprentices suspected something, but no one had proof. A few of the younger smiths? They were happy to buy ‘discounted’ materials, no questions asked. But the masters? They don’t know a thing.”

Thorgar smiled grimly. “They do now.”

Thorgar knew one thing for certain—if dwarves were going to fight, let it be with hammers in hand, not knives in the dark. Letting a weaselly merchant keep fueling the feud wasn’t an option.

So he did what any sensible, justice-loving dwarf would do.

He grabbed Bellwin Rasp by the collar, lifted him onto his toes, and dragged him straight to the Guild Hall.

By the time Thorgar stormed into the great hall of Durgul’Um’s City Council, word had already spread.

Both the Smiths’ Guild and Goldsmiths’ Guild had gathered—a room full of scowling dwarves, red-faced from weeks of accusations and simmering grudges. Tension crackled in the air, like a forge just waiting to spill over.

The City Council members, seated behind a long stone table, looked equally exasperated.

One of them, an elderly dwarf with a steel-gray beard, slammed his fist onto the table.

“ENOUGH! THIS BICKERING HAS GONE ON LONG ENOUGH!”

Master Ornrik of the Goldsmiths huffed. “Aye, I agree! Let’s hear what this ‘neutral investigator’ has actually found!”

Thorgar strode forward, shoving Bellwin in front of him.

“What I’ve found is a rat.”

Bellwin stumbled, adjusting his fine silks, looking thoroughly miserable.

Thorgar turned to face the crowd.

“This fool here? He’s the reason both yer guilds have been at each other’s throats.”

The room fell silent.

The blacksmiths scowled. The goldsmiths frowned.

Master Ornrik crossed his arms. “Explain.”

Thorgar cracked his knuckles.

“It wasn’t the smiths stealin’ gold, and it wasn’t the goldsmiths hoardin’ it. Bellwin here’s been takin’ ‘a little off the top’ of shipments, sellin’ cheap gold to the smiths, and jackin’ up prices for the goldsmiths—playin’ both sides for his own profit.”

The room erupted.

“WHAT?!”

“YE LYIN’ WORM!”

“I’LL SNAP YER BLOODY LEGS!”

Bellwin flinched, raising his hands. “Now, now, let’s not resort to violence—”

Thorgar grabbed him by the shoulder, forcing him to meet the glares of both guilds.

“Go on, Bellwin. Tell ‘em yerself.”

The merchant gulped. “A-alright! Alright! I admit it! I took a little extra! But can you blame me? The smiths were desperate for gold, the goldsmiths were willing to pay a fortune—I was just filling a need!”

“Ye were fillin’ YER pockets, ye greasy wretch!” one of the blacksmiths growled.

Master Ornrik’s face darkened. “So our missing gold wasn’t being stolen by our own kin—but by an outsider?”

The blacksmith leader crossed his arms. “And we were buyin’ it thinkin’ we were outsmartin’ the goldsmiths, when in truth, we were bein’ played.”

Thorgar smiled. “Aye. Ye were both fools.”

The elderly council member leaned forward, fixing Bellwin with a cold glare.

“Bellwin Rasp,” he said, voice steady as an anvil strike, “for manipulating trade and causing unrest among the guilds, you are hereby banned from doing business within Durgul’Um. Any assets you have left in the city will be seized, and you will repay the value of the stolen gold —with interest.”

Bellwin’s face drained of color. “Banned?! But—but this is my home!”

The councilor narrowed his eyes. “Then ye should’ve thought twice before playing games with dwarven steel and gold. Guards! Get him out of my sight!”

Two heavily armored dwarven guards stepped forward, grabbing Bellwin by the arms. He whimpered as they dragged him away, his protests fading into the background.

Once the dust settled, the council turned back to the two guild masters.

“And as for you lot,” the councilor continued, “the city will now oversee the gold trade directly. All future transactions will be monitored, and prices regulated to keep things fair. That should keep this from happenin’ again.”

Master Ornrik sighed, rubbing his temples. “Not ideal… but fair.”

The blacksmith leader grunted. “Aye. Long as I can still get enough gold to forge a proper axe, I’ll take the deal.”

Thorgar rolled his shoulders. “Good. Then we’re done here.”

A moment of silence hung in the air.

Then, slowly, Master Ornrik extended his hand to the blacksmith leader.

The blacksmith eyed it warily… then clasped it.

A few apprentices clapped.

The tension finally broke.

Later that evening, Thorgar sat in the Smiths’ Guild Hall, a fresh tankard of ale in one hand and a finely crafted weapon in the other.

His reward was a gold-inlaid axe, sturdy and sharp, with the insignia of both guilds forged into the hilt.

“Not bad, eh?” one of the blacksmiths chuckled, watching Thorgar inspect the weapon.

Thorgar grinned. “Aye. It’ll do nicely.”

He took a long drink of ale, satisfied. Another grudge settled, another day’s work well done.

But if there was one thing he knew, it was this—trouble always found its way back to a wandering dwarf.

And he was ready for it.

With his gold-inlaid axe strapped to his back and a satisfied mind from settling the Gilded Grudge, Thorgar decided to spend the day investigating the guilds of Durgul’Um.

He had no particular goal in mind—just a dwarf’s natural curiosity. Guilds were the bones of any proper dwarven city, and learning how they functioned was just as good as learning who actually ran things.

The Stonemasons’ Guildhall was a fortress of craftsmanship. The building itself was proof of the guild’s mastery—massive stone pillars carved with intricate geometric designs, statues of legendary builders standing tall at the entrance, and walls polished smooth as marble.

Inside, dwarves bustled about, examining blueprints, chiseling slabs of stone, and debating the merits of limestone versus granite.

Thorgar approached a group of senior masons, who were hunched over a detailed city map.

One of them, a burly dwarf with thick arms dusted in stone powder, noticed him and gave a grunt.

“Aye? What brings ye to the Masons' Hall, traveler? Ye look like a fighter, not a builder.”

Thorgar shrugged. “Aye, but I’m a curious one. Every city’s built on its guilds, and I like to know how things work. Figured I’d see how the real labor gets done.”

The burly dwarf nodded approvingly. “Aye, a proper mindset. Well, lad, we’re in the middle of a damn mess, so if ye want to learn, ye might just find yerself workin’.”

Thorgar raised an eyebrow. “Oh? What’s the trouble?”

The burly mason let out a deep sigh, rubbing his forehead.

“It’s the blasted Woodworkers’ Guild. The city’s buildin’ a grand new marketplace over in Brighthollow, aye? It should be a work of solid stone, built to last a thousand years. But those wood-chippers want to throw together some flimsy timber nonsense. They say it’ll be more ‘artistic’ and ‘charming.’ Bah!”

Another stonemason grumbled. “The City Council’s sick of the arguin’. They want a neutral voice before we end up swingin’ hammers at each other.”

Thorgar chuckled. “Sounds familiar. Ye need someone to talk sense into both sides?”

“Aye, but there’s more.”

The burly mason crossed his arms.

“The project’s already fallin’ behind, and not just ‘cause of our bickerin’. Supplies are bein’ sabotaged. Some of our best-cut stone’s been found with cracks that weren’t there before. And the woodworkers? They’re claimin’ their planks are warpin’ overnight.”

Thorgar frowned. “Someone’s makin’ it look like ye both can’t do yer jobs.”

“Exactly. And to make things worse, the city’s architect—the one meant to oversee the whole thing—has gone missing.”

Thorgar let out a low whistle. “A lost architect, sabotaged materials, and a feud between stone and wood? Sounds like a proper mystery.”

The burly mason grinned. “Aye. And if ye can fix it, ye’ll earn the respect of both guilds—maybe even an honorary title.”

Thorgar cracked his knuckles.

“Alright. I’ll settle yer stone-versus-stump debate. But first, I need to see what these woodworkers have to say.”

The stonemasons nodded, pointing him toward the Woodworkers’ Guild across the city.

Thorgar grinned.

“Let’s go see if they’ve got splinters in their skulls.”

Thorgar had settled one guild feud already, but this one smelled even worse. Sabotage, missing architects, and stubborn dwarves? It was a recipe for trouble.

He decided to hear out the Woodworkers’ Guild next.

If there was one thing he’d learned, it was that every side had its own version of the truth.

Unlike the fortress-like Stonemasons’ Hall, the Woodworkers’ Guild Hall was a warm and welcoming structure, built from rich oak and decorated with elegant carvings. The scent of fresh-cut timber and tree sap filled the air as apprentices shaped planks, carved intricate designs, and assembled sturdy furniture.

Thorgar approached the main workshop, where a group of dwarves were arguing over a blueprint.

A lean, sharp-eyed dwarf with a braided mustache noticed him first. He wore a fine leather apron and had a chisel tucked behind his ear.

“Aye? And who might ye be, wanderer? Lookin’ to buy a fine-crafted chair? Or maybe ye finally realized that wood’s the better choice over stone?”

Thorgar chuckled. “I’m Thorgar Stonequill. And I’m here to figure out why ye lot and the masons are about to start throwin’ hammers at each other.”

The woodworker scoffed. “Pah! Because them stoneheads can’t see past their own noses!”

Another woodworker grumbled. “They say wood ain’t durable, that it’ll rot in the rain. What nonsense! Properly treated timber lasts generations!”

The mustached dwarf crossed his arms. “They want to turn Brighthollow’s marketplace into another damned dwarven bunker. All cold stone, no character! We want it to be open, full of natural beauty—wooden arches, carved columns, artistry on every stall. A place where the city’s people can feel welcome.”

Thorgar nodded. “And what about the delays? The cracked stone? The warped planks? Ye think they’re behind it?”

The mustached dwarf frowned. “No. They’d never do something so underhanded. For all their stubbornness, they’re honorable craftsmen.”

One of the apprentices spoke up. “I heard rumors, though. Some merchants are makin’ a fortune off these delays. The longer the project stalls, the more they can sell off cheap materials for high prices.”

Thorgar stroked his beard. “That lines up with what I heard. Could be someone’s stirrin’ the pot on purpose.”

The guild master nodded. “Then that’s where ye need to start, Stonequill. Find out who’s truly behind this mess.”

Thorgar grinned. “Aye, that’s what I plan to do.”

With both guilds’ grievances heard, Thorgar set off to investigate the sabotage.

He started with the stone yard—where the masons stored their materials before transport.

Sure enough, several large stone blocks had visible cracks. But when Thorgar ran his hand along the fractures, he noticed something strange.

The cracks weren’t natural.

They had been chiseled—just enough to weaken the stone, so it would break when lifted.

“Hmph. That ain’t no accident. That’s sabotage.”

Then, at the wood storage yard, he found planks twisted and warped as if they’d been left in damp conditions. But the weather had been clear for weeks.

Thorgar crouched, running a finger along the wood. His fingertips came away sticky.

“Oil. Some rat’s been treatin’ the planks with warpin’ oils to ruin ‘em.”

Someone wanted both guilds to fail.

Thorgar spent the next few hours asking questions. A few bribes here, a little dwarven intimidation there, and eventually, he got his answer.

A rival merchant—Barlo Ironscrip, a greasy dwarf known for shady deals—had been bribing workers to sabotage materials.

The longer the marketplace project stalled, the more he profited from selling cheap imports.

Thorgar found him in the back of a warehouse, counting coin.

Without a word, Thorgar walked up, grabbed him by the collar, and slammed him against a stack of crates.

"Oi, Barlo. Let's have a chat."

The merchant sputtered. "H-hey now! I'm just a businessman! No need for violence!"

Thorgar grinned. "Aye, but I like violence. And if ye don't start talkin', I'll be givin' ye a firsthand demonstration."

With Barlo's confession in hand, Thorgar dragged him straight to the City Council.

The evidence was undeniable. The Council fined Barlo heavily, banned him from future contracts, and sent a formal decree demanding the guilds put their feud aside.

To settle things once and for all, the City Council ruled that both stone and wood would be used. Stone for the foundation and stalls. Wood for the arches, artistic designs, and decorative features.

Both guilds grumbled, but neither could argue that it was a fair solution.

And as a reward for his efforts, both guilds offered Thorgar an honorary membership.

The stonemasons gifted him a masterfully carved stone pipe, while the woodworkers crafted a fine oak tankard with golden inlays.

Thorgar laughed, accepting both.

"A pipe for me thoughts and a mug for me drink. Aye, this was a job well done."

As the sun set over Durgul'Um, Thorgar sat outside a tavern, puffing on his new pipe, sipping ale from his new tankard.

Another grudge settled, another lesson learned.

A need for coin

After settling the Stone vs. Stump dispute, Thorgar found himself in an unexpected position —the Woodworkers' Guild offered him a job.

"Aye, ye settled our mess, but tell me, Stonequill, ever thought of working with wood instead of just choppin' it?"

Thorgar stroked his beard. He'd spent his life swinging axes, lifting tankards, and writing words—but crafting?

"Can't say I have, but I'm a dwarf who likes learnin'and I am in need of coin."

And so, for the first time in years, Thorgar put down his sword and picked up a chisel.

For weeks, he learned the art of woodworking. He sawed thick planks with steady hands, feeling the grain of the wood beneath his touch. He hammered wooden joints together, learning how to craft strong supports. He chiseled intricate designs, struggling at first but slowly improving under the watchful eyes of the master carpenters.

By the time he had the basics down, the guild sent him off on his first real job—one that no dwarf could turn down.

The docks of Durgul'Um were alive with the scent of salt, the sound of hammers, and the steady creak of wood.

Here, a massive shipyard stretched along the water, where dwarves and humans worked side by side, crafting vessels to sail the great rivers and seas.

Thorgar arrived with a group of woodworkers, his pack slung over his shoulder.

A foreman, a burly dwarf with a beard tied back in a sailor's knot, grunted as he looked Thorgar over.

"They send us another soft-handed apprentice?"

Thorgar grinned. "Soft hands? Aye, let's see how soft they are after a day's work."

The foreman snorted. "Good. Grab a saw. We got a ship to build."

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The skeletal frame of the ship was already taking shape—a great wooden vessel meant for long trade routes and deep waters.

Thorgar spent the next few weeks knee-deep in sawdust, sweat, and effort.

Every morning, he and the other workers hauled massive timber beams from the storage yard to the docks. Planks of rich oak were carried on his broad shoulders, his muscles aching by the end of the day. Iron nails, wooden pegs, coils of thick rope—all had to be brought to their proper places. He worked alongside other dwarves, grunting in effort but never shying away from the hard labor.

Thorgar spent hours with a saw in hand, cutting planks to fit the curved belly of the ship. He learned to measure twice, cut once, as any mistake meant starting over. He worked alongside experienced shipwrights, who showed him how to bend planks to fit the frame. He sanded rough edges, smoothing the wood to prepare it for sealing. He hammered wooden pegs deep into the beams, securing the ship’s ribs together. He helped fit the deck planks, driving nails in deep with powerful swings. He took his turn sealing the hull with tar and pitch, ensuring the ship would be watertight and ready for the waves.

The shipwrights’ camp was a simple but sturdy settlement near the docks, where workers slept, ate, and drank after long shifts.

Thorgar was given a bunk in one of the worker lodges, a simple wooden cabin where the smell of sawdust clung to everything.

After a long day, the builders gathered around bonfires, drinking and telling stories. Mugs of ale clanked together, foam spilling onto the ground. Dwarves sang deep, booming songs, their voices rolling over the water. A few men gambled with dice, placing bets with copper and silver.

Thorgar fit in well. He arm-wrestled a human shipwright and won, earning a free round of ale. He challenged an older dwarf to a drinking contest and lost, waking up with sawdust in his beard. He sat by the fire at night, smoking his pipe, enjoying the simple pleasure of hard work well done.

As the weeks passed, he felt something new.

Not just the thrill of adventure or gold, but the satisfaction of building something that would last.

One night, after another long shift, Thorgar sat on a crate overlooking the water, his pipe glowing in the moonlight.

He pulled out his journal and scribbled a few notes:

"Woodworking ain't just choppin' logs—it's patience, precision, and knowin' how a thing should fit before ye even cut it. I ain't a master, but I've learned enough to appreciate the craft."

"Shipbuildin' is a hard life, but a good one. When ye build a ship, ye build somethin' that'll carry folk across the world. A warrior fights for a moment, but a builder? A builder leaves somethin' behind."

He leaned back, blowing smoke into the cool night air.

For the first time in a while, he wasn't chasing gold, glory, or trouble.

He was just a dwarf, learning a craft, doing honest work.

And that, he thought, was worth raising a tankard to.

Thorgar had fought in pitched battles, faced bandits on the road, and drank more ale than a man should—but nothing in his life had prepared him for the endless labor of shipbuilding.

The shipyard was alive from dawn until dusk, the sounds of saws grinding, hammers pounding, and dwarves shouting orders filling the salty air.

This was no mere riverboat—the vessel Thorgar worked on was a two-masted caravel, a fine merchant ship meant for long-distance trade across the seas.

Every day, he toiled under the sun, the smell of sawdust and tar thick in the air. His arms burned from hauling timber, his fingers raw from splinters, and his shirt was forever soaked in sweat and salt.

And yet—he had no choice.

His coin purse was running light. The coin he'd made settling feuds had been spent on lodgings, food, and ale, and there weren't enough easy jobs left in the city.

So here he was. A dwarf with a sword, now a dwarf with a hammer.

Thorgar moved between different tasks throughout the shipbuilding process, slowly learning the bones of the vessel.

The keel was the spine of the ship, and everything had to be built around it. Thorgar helped align massive wooden beams, holding them steady as others drove iron bolts into place. Apprentices cursed and sweated, hoisting ribs into position, while masters checked every joint for flaws.

"Oi, Stonequill!" a grizzled dwarf named Garm Rockhand called from atop a plank. "Ye ever think about quittin' adventurin' and just buildin' boats for a livin'?"

Thorgar snorted. "Aye, right after I decide to settle down and weave tapestries. Ain't likely."

Another worker, a young human named Edric, laughed. "Maybe he just likes an honest day's work for once."

Thorgar grinned. "I like me coin more, lad. And right now, this is the only way I'm makin' any."

Once the hull was secure, it was time to lay the deck planks—each one had to be cut, fitted, and hammered down. Thorgar worked with heavy oak boards, driving them into place with iron nails and wooden pegs. The shipwrights then caulked the gaps, using a hot mixture of tar and fibers to seal the wood, ensuring the ship would be watertight.

"Damn stuff stinks," Thorgar muttered, rubbing tar off his fingers.

"Aye, but it keeps the water out," an old carpenter chuckled. "And keepin' water out is the whole damn point of a boat."

Thorgar chuckled. "Aye, fair enough."

One of the most dangerous parts of the job was raising the masts—long, thick logs of seasoned pine, which had to be lifted, positioned, and secured. Ropes and pulleys strained as workers pulled the massive poles upright. Thorgar and a few others held it steady, guiding the base into position while others drove in the mast wedges.

"Steady! Steady! If it falls, we're all dead!" the foreman barked.

Thorgar gritted his teeth, bracing against the weight until the mast locked into place.

“There she is! That’ll hold!”

The other workers cheered, wiping sweat from their brows. But not everyone was so lucky.

One worker, a young human named Garrin, had climbed high up the main mast, trying to secure the topmost rigging.

The wind was strong that day, the sea breeze whipping around them.

“Oi, Garrin! Be careful up there!” one of the workers shouted.

“I got it, I got it! Just—”

Then, a terrible snap. The rope he was standing on frayed and broke. For a moment, it felt like time stopped. Then he fell.

Fifty feet straight down. He hit the deck with a sickening crunch, his body twisting in a way no man’s should.

The entire shipyard went silent. Thorgar was the first to reach him, but he already knew—there was no saving Garrin. The foreman cursed, removing his cap, while others muttered quiet prayers. No one spoke for a long time.

Then the foreman turned to the crew. “Back to work.”

“But—” one apprentice started, only for the foreman to cut him off.

“We mourn him later. If we stop now, we risk another fall. He’d want us to finish the damn ship.”

Thorgar gritted his teeth, then nodded. He picked up his hammer and went back to work.

Death was no stranger to him. But seeing a man die not from battle, but from a slip of the foot?

That sat in his mind for the rest of the day.

That evening, as the workers gathered for food and drink, tensions were high.

Thorgar sat at one of the long wooden tables, gulping down a mug of ale when a burly man named Hadrek—a seasoned shipwright—sat across from him, glaring.

“Stonequill. I heard ye say earlier that oak’s the best for the hull.”

Thorgar raised an eyebrow. “Aye? And?”

Hadrek snorted. “Ye don’t know shite. Pine’s better. Lighter. Faster. Won’t weigh the ship down like yer thick-skulled opinions.”

Thorgar grinned. “Oh, aye? And when ye hit a reef, what keeps ye afloat? Thick planks, not brittle twigs.”

Hadrek slammed his mug on the table. “I been buildin’ ships for twenty years, lad! Don’t ye talk to me about wood!”

Thorgar laughed. “I’d listen, Hadrek, if I thought ye knew what ye were talkin’ about.”

Hadrek’s fist shot out.

Thorgar barely had time to dodge before a meaty punch grazed his jaw.

The entire table went silent.

Thorgar grinned, wiped his chin… then punched Hadrek straight in the face.

The man toppled backward, crashing into a barrel.

For a second, nothing.

Then cheers erupted from the workers.

“Aye, now that’s a proper dispute settlin’!”

The foreman, drinking nearby, just sighed. “Idiots. But at least now it’s settled.”

Thorgar grabbed his mug and took another deep drink.

Just another day at the docks.

The shipyard of Durgul’Um was always bustling, but today, the air was thick with frustration and curses.

Thorgar arrived at The Stonebeard’s dry dock early in the morning, expecting another day of hammering, sanding, and arguing about wood.

Instead, he found a crowd of workers gathered near the frame of the half-built ship, shouting over one another.

The foreman, a grizzled dwarf named Hargun Timberfist, stomped up to Thorgar, his face red with rage.

“It’s gone, Stonequill! GONE!”

Thorgar frowned. “What’s gone?”

Hargun pointed a thick finger at the empty space beneath the ship.

“The keel, lad! The gods-damned keel’s gone missin’!”

Thorgar blinked. The keel was the central beam running along the bottom of the ship—the spine that held the whole structure together. Without it, The Stonebeard wouldn't float—it wouldn't even hold together.

"Ye mean to tell me someone just walked off with a thirty-foot beam o' reinforced ironwood?"

Hargun threw up his hands. "Aye! Last night it was sittin' right here, ready to be fitted. This mornin'? Nothin' but sawdust!"

"A massive bloody beam doesn't just get up and walk away, Hargun."

"Well, it's damn sure not here now!"

The workers were already blaming each other. The Woodworkers' Guild accused the Dockworkers, saying they misplaced it during unloading. The Dockworkers swore the Woodworkers never delivered it in the first place. Some superstitious sailors whispered that the ship was cursed—a bad omen before its first voyage. And then there was the mysterious figure someone saw sneaking around last night, but no one could agree on what they looked like.

"Ain't a mystery without a few fools throwin' in bad guesses, eh?" Thorgar muttered.

Thorgar rubbed his temples. He was here to build a ship, not chase ghosts.

But coin was coin, and he'd learned long ago that if a problem needed fixin', there was always someone willing to pay for it.

He turned to Hargun.

"Right. I'll find yer keel. But if I do, I expect a bit more than a pat on the back, aye?"

Hargun grumbled. "Fine. Ye help us fix this mess, and I'll see to it ye get a proper cut o' the ship's commission."

Thorgar grinned. "Now we're talkin'. Time to find me a missing beam."

Thorgar pulled his pipe from his belt, stuffed it with Redvine leaf, and lit it with a flick of his flint. He took a long, slow puff, letting the smoke curl from his nostrils as he surveyed the chaos around him. The workers were still shouting at each other, the dockhands were swearing innocence, and the foreman looked ready to strangle the next man who suggested the keel had simply "gone missing."

He exhaled a heavy sigh. "Right. First things first."

Stolen wood meant one thing—someone had to move it. You didn't just pick up a massive beam of ironwood and walk off with it like a sack of potatoes. It needed carts, ropes, and men to haul it. That meant tracks, witnesses, and someone, somewhere, who got paid to keep their mouth shut.

With the shipyard still buzzing with tension, Thorgar decided his best bet was checking the scene of the crime first.

The area beneath the half-finished ship was wide and clear, meant to give workers space to maneuver heavy materials into place. A few crates and barrels were scattered nearby, but the spot where the keel had rested was unmistakable—an empty space in the dust, the imprint of the great wooden beam still visible.

Thorgar knelt and ran his fingers along the ground. The sawdust had been disturbed, swept aside in places where boot prints overlapped. A set of deep, grooved tracks ran from where the beam had been, leading toward the back of the shipyard, where carts were usually loaded. He traced the lines with his eyes—too large for a single cart, too deep to be moved by hand. Whatever took the keel, it was big and heavy enough to need a proper rig.

He followed the trail, walking slowly, taking in the details. A few workers gave him sidelong glances but said nothing. They knew better than to interrupt a dwarf when he was tracking. The path led toward the loading area, where carts came and went, filled with lumber, tools, and barrels of tar.

There, leaning against a stack of planks, a thin, rat-faced man in a tattered green vest chewed on a piece of dried meat. His eyes flicked toward Thorgar, then away just as fast.

Thorgar smiled. He had found his first loose thread.

Casually, he approached, taking another long drag from his pipe before speaking. “Nice day for work, aye?”

The man didn’t look at him. “Aye. If ye got work.”

Thorgar nodded, rolling his shoulders as he stopped just a foot away from him. “Shame about the lost keel. Strange thing, that. Somethin’ that big don’t just wander off on its own.”

The man grunted. “Don’t know nothin’ about it.”

Thorgar grinned and exhaled a cloud of smoke into the man’s face. “Oh, aye, I believe that. But here’s the thing—I reckon someone had to move it, and I reckon a man what spends his days leanin’ on crates and watchin’ carts might’ve seen somethin’ useful. What do ye reckon?”

The man coughed, waving the smoke away. “Even if I did see somethin’, what’s it to me?”

Thorgar chuckled, then, in a blur of motion, grabbed the man by the collar and slammed him against the nearest crate. The impact knocked the breath from his lungs, and his dried meat hit the ground with a soft thud.

“I reckon,” Thorgar said, his voice dangerously soft, “that I ain’t in the mood for games.”

The man’s hands shot up in surrender, his face pale. “Alright! Alright! Bloody hells, no need to crack my ribs!”

Thorgar eased his grip slightly, but didn't let go. "Talk."

The man swallowed hard. "It—it weren't the dockhands, alright? Some men came in late last night, after most of us had gone. They had a rig—big cart, thick wheels, pulled by two oxen. They hitched up the beam and rolled it right out. But I swear, I don't know where they took it!"

Thorgar narrowed his eyes. "Did ye see who was leadin' 'em?"

The man hesitated, then nodded. "Aye… some rich-looking bastard in a dark coat. Didn't look like a worker—hands were too clean. Gave a few coins to the night guards, then off they went."

Thorgar finally released him, stepping back. "That's better. Now, where'd they take it?"

"I don't know, I swear! But I heard 'em say somethin' about the north warehouse, the one near the quiet docks. That's all I know!"

Thorgar gave him a hard look, then nodded. "Aye. That'll do. Now get back to work before I decide I don't like yer face anymore."

The man didn't need telling twice. He scrambled away, rubbing his chest and muttering curses under his breath.

Thorgar turned on his heel, his jaw tightening. The north warehouse. That was where he'd find his next clue. And if his gut was right, he was about to meet the bastards responsible for the theft.

Gripping his axe, he set off at a steady pace.

It was time to reclaim the Keel of Destiny.

The north warehouse stood at the very edge of the shipyard, near the quieter docks where fewer workers passed through. It was an old, heavy-timbered structure, its roof sagging slightly from years of sea air and neglect. Unlike the busier storage areas filled with the noise of hammering and shouted orders, this place was eerily still.

Thorgar approached with slow, deliberate steps, his boots crunching on the gravel path. A stolen keel wouldn't be easy to hide, but it also wouldn't be left in the open. If it was here, it'd be tucked inside, waiting for whoever had the gall to take it.

The great wooden doors were closed, but not locked. That was telling—whoever was inside wasn't expecting trouble. Thorgar pressed a calloused hand to the rough planks, inhaled deeply, then pushed them open just enough to slip inside.

The air was thick with the scent of sawdust, oil, and damp rope. Stacks of crates and barrels lined the walls, creating narrow aisles that led deeper into the gloom. Weak shafts of light filtered in through gaps in the wooden slats, casting long, uneven shadows across the floor.

Then he saw it.

At the back of the warehouse, resting across a pair of thick support beams, lay the missing keel.

A thirty-foot ironwood beam, its surface already marked with the precise notches made for fitting into the ship's frame. Seeing it there, unguarded, was almost insulting. Whoever had stolen it had no intention of using it for anything else.

Thorgar narrowed his eyes. So if they weren't planning to repurpose it, what was the point of taking it?

The answer came a moment later.

A door creaked open on the far side of the warehouse, and voices echoed through the space.

"…I don't care how much coin it takes. Keep it here a few more days, and the whole project collapses."

"Fine, but this is risky. If the wrong people come sniffin' around—"

Thorgar stepped forward, his boots scuffing against the wooden floor. The voices immediately went silent.

Then—footsteps. Fast, approaching.

A man stepped into view, his coat a deep, expensive black, embroidered at the edges. His hair was slicked back, and his fingers were adorned with more rings than a man ought to wear. He was flanked by two rough-looking workers, both gripping clubs, their expressions already sour.

The rich man's eyes landed on Thorgar, and for the briefest moment, there was a flicker of annoyance—then, a smooth, practiced smile.

"Well now," he said, voice smooth as polished silver, "I wasn't expecting company."

Thorgar rolled his shoulders, letting his hand drift toward his belt, where his axe hung comfortably. "Aye, well, I wasn't expectin' to find a stolen keel sittin' here like a bloody tavern bench, but here we are."

The rich man let out a small chuckle. "Stolen? No, no, my good dwarf, you misunderstand. I merely had it relocated for… safekeeping."

Thorgar grinned. "Safekeepin', aye? Funny, 'cause last I checked, wood don't need protectin' unless it's bein' threatened. And unless yer about to tell me ye were savin' it from a plague of termites, I'd say ye just got caught holdin' someone else's goods."

The rich man's smile didn't falter, but his eyes darkened. "Do you have any idea who you're speaking to?"

Thorgar pretended to think for a moment. “Aye, aye, give me a second. I know this one…” He snapped his fingers. “Oh! Right! A fella who’s about to be bleedin’ on the floor if he don’t give me a damn good reason why I shouldn’t take that beam back right now.”

The two hired men stepped forward, gripping their clubs tighter.

The rich man sighed. “You’re bold, dwarf, I’ll give you that. But let’s not be hasty. You see, I have investments in these docks. The Stonebeard is… problematic for me. If it sails on time, certain interests of mine are disrupted. Delaying it benefits me. So, I found a way to ensure it remains unfinished for just a little while longer.”

Thorgar spat on the floor. “Ye mean ye lined some pockets and pulled a stunt fit for a half-witted bandit. Aye, real clever.”

The man’s smile finally vanished. “Walk away, dwarf. Take whatever coin they’re paying you and forget this ever happened. It would be a shame if something… unfortunate happened to you.”

Thorgar grinned and cracked his knuckles. “Aye? And it’d be a shame if ye had to drink yer breakfast through a straw after I’m done rearrangin’ yer jaw.”

One of the hired thugs lunged first, swinging his club toward Thorgar’s ribs. But Thorgar was ready for it.

He sidestepped, catching the man’s wrist, twisting it sharply. A sickening crack filled the air, followed by a howl of pain. The club clattered to the floor as the thug fell to his knees, clutching his now-broken wrist.

The second man was faster, swinging for Thorgar’s head. But Thorgar ducked, slamming a fist into the man’s gut, then bringing his knee up into his chin. The man staggered, then fell flat on his back, groaning.

The rich man took a cautious step backward, eyes darting toward the door.

Thorgar smiled. “Now then, ye were sayin’?”

The man hesitated for a split second too long. Then, he bolted.

Thorgar sighed. “Ah, hell.”

He took off after him, boots pounding against the wooden floor as the man scrambled toward the exit. But Thorgar was faster. He caught the man just as he reached the door, grabbing him by the collar and slamming him face-first into the wall.

The man groaned, his body going limp.

Thorgar let him drop to the ground, stepping over him with a shake of his head. “Wealthy types. Never learn.”

With the fight settled, Thorgar turned back toward the keel. The damn thing was too big to carry on his own, but that wasn't a problem—he had plenty of workers at the shipyard who'd be more than happy to help once they heard what had happened.

He left the warehouse, rolling his shoulders as he stepped into the morning light.

The keel had been found. The bastards behind it had been handled. And soon, The Stonebeard would sail.

But first, he had to get his payment.

And one good dark ale.

Thorgar stood outside the warehouse, stretching his shoulders and rolling the tension out of his neck. The sun had fully risen now, casting golden light over the docks, but the warmth did little to ease the ache settling into his knuckles.

The rich bastard lay where Thorgar had dropped him, groaning softly. His two thugs were still out cold inside. Thorgar considered, briefly, dragging him into the sea for a little "lesson in humility," but that might complicate things. He had what he needed—the keel was found, and the job was nearly done.

It was time to head back to the shipyard and let the foreman know the good news.

The walk back was uneventful, save for a few dockworkers giving him curious glances. A bruised, bloodied dwarf stomping through the shipyard at this hour wasn't exactly a rare sight, but it wasn't an everyday thing either.

When Thorgar reached the half-built Stonebeard, the morning crew was already hard at work, hammering, sawing, and hoisting planks into place.

He spotted Foreman Hargun Timberfist near a stack of lumber, shouting at an apprentice who had clearly miscut a plank.

"If ye wanna ruin good wood, go start a damn bonfire! That's ironwood ye just wasted, boy!"

The apprentice mumbled something and shuffled off. Hargun turned and spotted Thorgar, his thick brows furrowing.

"Stonequill. Tell me ye got good news, or I swear by Moradin's beard, I'm gonna snap an oar over someone's back."

Thorgar grinned. "Well, if ye want bad news, I can make somethin' up, but aye—I found yer keel."

Hargun blinked. Then blinked again. Then let out a loud bark of laughter.

"Ha! Knew ye'd sort it out. Where is it?"

“Sittin’ in the north warehouse, waitin’ to be hauled back. Some greedy merchant tried to stall our work for his own gain. Paid a few thugs to lift it in the night, figurin’ he’d delay us long enough to kill the project.”

Hargun’s expression darkened. “That bastard. Ye settle it?”

Thorgar wiped a bit of dried blood from his knuckles. “Aye. He won’t be tryin’ that again anytime soon.”

Hargun nodded approvingly. “Good. We’ll send a crew to drag the damned thing back right away.” He clapped Thorgar on the shoulder. “Ye did good work, lad. I owe ye more than just thanks.”

“Aye, ye do. About that payment...”

Hargun grinned. “Don’t ye worry. I ain’t forgettin’. Come see me after we get the keel back in place. There’ll be a proper reward waitin’ for ye.”

Thorgar gave a satisfied nod. “Sounds fair. In the meantime, I’m thinkin’ I’ve earned meself a drink.”

Hargun laughed. “Aye, lad. Go soak yer throat.”

The Goofy Goose Tavern was already buzzing with life by the time Thorgar stomped through its doors. The scent of ale, roasted meat, and sweat filled the air, and a few familiar faces called out greetings as he made his way to the bar.

The barkeep, a stout woman with strong arms and an unimpressed glare, eyed him as he sat down.

“Ye look like ye fought a wall and lost. What’ll it be?”

Thorgar grinned, rubbing his sore knuckles. “Somethin’ strong. And bring a second, in case the first one don’t work fast enough.”

A mug hit the counter a moment later, foaming and golden. Thorgar lifted it and took a long, slow pull, sighing in satisfaction.

The first drink was for the work done. The second?

That was for whatever came next.

Thorgar had intended to drink just enough to ease the stiffness in his bones, maybe enough to dull the ache in his knuckles, but somewhere around the fourth tankard, that plan had drowned under waves of good ale.

By the time he finally staggered back to the builders’ camp, the sun had long since dipped below the horizon, and the fires burned low in their pits. The camp smelled of woodsmoke, sweat, and the lingering scent of sawdust, a scent that had sunk so deeply into his clothes he was certain he’d still be smelling it in the afterlife.

The other workers were mostly asleep, save for a few stubborn drinkers gathered around one of the last fires, swapping stories between deep pulls of whatever was left in their mugs.

Thorgar kicked off his boots, threw his coat over the edge of his cot, and collapsed onto the straw mattress. His body protested, sore from days of lifting beams, hammering pegs, and chasing down thieves, but it was the kind of soreness that came from honest work—the kind he didn't mind.

And so, for the first time in weeks, he slept like a stone.

Thorgar's peace lasted until a loud, insistent banging on the wooden door of his cabin shattered it.

"Oi, Stonequill! Wake yer arse up! Foreman wants ye!"

Thorgar groaned and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. His mouth was dry, his head pounded, and his back felt like he'd been used as an anvil in a blacksmith's shop.

"I swear, if this is about another missin' beam, I'll start usin' people for planks," he muttered, dragging himself up.

He pulled on his boots, threw on his coat, and shoved open the door to find a stocky, sunburned worker standing outside, arms crossed.

"What's this about?" Thorgar grumbled.

The worker jerked his thumb toward the docks. "Hargun wants to see ye. Now. Says he's got yer payment, but there's… somethin' else."

Thorgar narrowed his eyes. "Somethin' else?"

"Aye. Some folk came askin' for ye this mornin'. Weren't the friendly type."

Thorgar stroked his beard, considering. Could've been nothing. Could've been trouble. Either way, he wasn't about to ignore the foreman when coin was on the table.

The shipyard was alive with movement when Thorgar arrived. The keel was finally back in place, and the workers were hard at work sealing the last sections of the hull. The Stonebeard was one step closer to completion, and with it, his time in the shipyard was coming to an end.

Foreman Hargun was waiting by a stack of finished planks, arms crossed, pipe clenched between his teeth. When he saw Thorgar, he nodded.

"Ye did good work, Stonequill. The keel's back, the bastards behind it are handled, and the ship's on track. So here's what's owed."

He reached into his belt pouch and tossed a heavy sack of coins to Thorgar.

Thorgar caught it mid-air and weighed it in his hand. A fair sum, heavy with silver. It wasn't the kind of fortune that would set him up for life, but it was more than enough to keep him fed, drunk, and free for a while.

He smiled. "A pleasure doin' business. Ye ever lose another ship part, ye know where to find me."

Hargun snorted. "Aye, aye. Just don't expect me to pay ye twice for the same job."

Thorgar was about to leave when the foreman's expression darkened.

"One more thing. A couple of lads came 'round this mornin', lookin' for ye. Didn't say who they were, but they weren't shipwrights."

Thorgar frowned. "They leave a name? A message?"

Hargun shook his head. "Just asked where ye were. I told 'em nothin', but I don't doubt they'll be back."

Thorgar let out a slow breath, thinking. The merchant he'd roughed up over the stolen keel—was he looking for revenge? Maybe someone else had taken notice of his work, someone who didn't like their business being disturbed.

Either way, he wasn't about to sit around and wait.

Thorgar left the shipyard, the weight of his earned silver clinking at his side, and found himself standing at a crossroads.

He could head back to the builders' camp, pretend this wasn't his problem, and hope whoever was looking for him gave up.

Or, he could do what any smart dwarf would do—find out who wanted him and why, and deal with it before they decided to make things harder.

He exhaled, adjusting his belt, and turned toward the city. Time to sniff out some answers.

Whoever was looking for him, they'd regret not just leaving well enough alone.

Thorgar strode into the city, the weight of his coin purse pressing comfortably against his hip. The silver was hard-earned, but silver didn't spend itself, and it sure as hells didn't protect a dwarf from unwanted attention.

Whoever was looking for him had come early—before most folk were awake, before the taverns had even started pouring morning ales. That meant they were either desperate, dangerous, or both.

And that meant he needed to find them before they found him.

The best place to start? The Goofy Goose.

The tavern smelled of stale beer, roasted meat, and the sweat of men who hadn't left their chairs in too many hours. The morning crowd was lighter than usual, just a few sailors nursing their hangovers and a couple of merchants muttering over ledgers.

Thorgar strode to the bar, nodding to the barkeep.

"Someone came lookin' for me this mornin'. Who?"

The barkeep, a broad-shouldered woman named Mira, leaned on the counter, polishing a mug with slow, deliberate motions.

"Aye, I remember. Three men. Didn't give names, but they weren't here for a drink. One of 'em had a broken nose, still swollen—looked fresh. Ye makin' enemies again, Stonequill?"

Thorgar smiled. "Aye, I'd be more surprised if I weren't."

Mira snorted. "Well, if ye care to know, they didn't stay long. Asked about ye, then left mutterin' somethin' about 'tryin' the gate.'"

Thorgar set a silver coin on the counter. "Good news, Mira. I ain't been murdered yet. Buy yerself a drink to celebrate."

Mira took the coin with a chuckle. "Try not to get killed before yer tab's paid, aye?"

Thorgar grinned. "No promises."

If they'd gone to the city gates, that meant one of two things—they thought he was leaving, or they wanted to make sure he didn't.

Either way, he had no intention of running.

The north gate was one of the busiest in Durgul'Um, with wagons rolling in, traders arguing with guards, and travelers making their way in and out. It was the kind of place where you could disappear in a crowd—or get dragged into an alley if you weren't paying attention.

Thorgar didn't bother hiding. Instead, he made himself very visible—walking right up to the nearest merchant stall and pretending to inspect a crate of dried fish.

It didn't take long.

A shadow moved behind him. Boots scuffed against the cobblestone.

Thorgar turned just in time to see three men stepping toward him.

One was tall and wiry, with a scar down his cheek. Another was broad-shouldered, carrying himself like a brawler. And the last?

A bandage wrapped around his broken nose.

The very same bastard whose face Thorgar had introduced to a wooden crate back at the warehouse.

“Well, well, if it ain’t the dwarf who don’t know when to quit,” Broken-Nose sneered, rolling his shoulders.

Thorgar grinned. “I quit plenty. Just not before I’ve made sure a job’s done.”

The tall one stepped forward. “You cost our employer a great deal of trouble, dwarf. He ain’t happy.”

Thorgar tilted his head. “Ah, the rich prick. He still breathin’? Shame.”

The brawler cracked his knuckles. “Won’t be breathin’ much longer if ye don’t start listenin’.”

Thorgar sighed. “Lads, I’ve had a long week. I’ve been hammerin’ nails, chasin’ thieves, punchin’ idiots, and buildin’ ships. Ye really think ye’re the worst problem I’ve faced?”

Broken-Nose sneered. “We ain’t here to fight, Stonequill. Not yet. We’re here to deliver a message.”

Thorgar crossed his arms. “Aye? Well, speak quick, before I get bored.”

The tall one took a step forward, his tone suddenly low and serious. “Our employer ain’t done with ye. He says ye got two choices. Either take the gold he’s offering and forget this whole mess… or he makes sure yer time in Durgul’Um comes to an unfortunate end.”

Thorgar grinned. “A bribe or a threat? That’s all? I thought this’d be interestin’.”

The brawler took another step forward, cracking his knuckles. “Ye really wanna push yer luck, dwarf?”

Thorgar exhaled. “Lad, if ye knew how much luck I’ve used up in my lifetime, ye’d know I don’t rely on it much.”

Then he swung.

His fist crashed into Broken-Nose’s already broken nose, sending him sprawling backward with a howl of pain. The brawler barely had time to react before Thorgar grabbed him by the shirt, headbutted him hard enough to send him to the ground, then turned toward the third man.

The tall one took a cautious step back, hands raised. “Alright! Alright! We’ll take the damn message back!”

Thorgar wiped a streak of blood from his knuckles. “Aye, ye will. And tell yer boss if he wants me gone, he can try it himself. Otherwise, next time I won’t be so polite.”

The tall one grabbed Broken-Nose by the arm, dragging him away as the brawler stumbled after them.

Thorgar watched them go, shaking his head.

Some folk just didn't learn.

With the thugs handled and the message sent, Thorgar was left standing at the city gates, the whole of Durgul'Um stretching out before him.

His purse was full, his fists were sore, and his work at the shipyard was done. But this city? It still had plenty of trouble to offer.

Maybe he'd find another job. Maybe trouble would find him first.

Either way, he wasn't going anywhere just yet.

And by Moradin's beard, he could use another drink.

Thorgar had sent his message. Now it was time to finish the job.

The rich bastard had pushed his luck, and Thorgar had given him every chance to let things lie. But some folk just don't know when to quit.

With his axe strapped to his back and his sword hanging comfortably at his hip, he set off through the streets, hunting his prey.

The streets of Durgul'Um were crowded, but Thorgar knew better than to let his guard down. He took the lesser-traveled roads, weaving through alleys where he could move unseen.

It wasn't long before trouble found him.

Two men stepped out of a shadowed doorway, blocking his path.

One was a mountain of a man, thick-armed and scarred, gripping a wicked-looking curved dagger. The other was lean and wiry, but his eyes held the kind of cold confidence that only came from a lifetime of killing.

Thorgar smiled. "Let me guess. Yer boss thought two of ye would be enough?"

The big one grinned. "Just enough to gut a stubborn dwarf."

Thorgar cracked his neck. "Then let's get on with it."

The big one lunged first, slashing toward Thorgar's chest, but he was slow. Thorgar sidestepped, drew his sword, and slashed clean through the bastard's arm.

Blood sprayed the alley walls as the severed limb hit the ground. The man screamed, but before he could react further, Thorgar's blade came around again in a brutal arc—taking his head clean off.

The second thug hesitated, eyes wide. He took a step back, then another. Then he turned and ran.

Thorgar growled. “Coward.”

He took off after him. The thug sprinted through the narrow streets, knocking over crates and shoving past startled merchants. Thorgar was faster. He cut through side alleys, vaulted over barrels, and gained ground with every stride. The thug skidded around a corner and darted into a familiar-looking warehouse—the same one where the keel had been hidden.

Thorgar grinned. “Right where I wanted ye.”

He drew his sword, kicked the door open, and stepped inside. The warehouse office was a two-story wooden structure, overlooking the main floor. And sitting inside, leaning back in a plush chair, was the rich bastard himself. He looked as smug as ever, sipping from a goblet of wine.

“You’re persistent, I’ll give you that,” he said.

Thorgar stepped forward. “Ye should’ve taken yer losses and walked away. Now I’m gonna carve ye open.”

The rich man sighed. “Unfortunately, I still have a business to run. And I can’t have an angry little dwarf ruining it.”

He gestured lazily, and four more thugs stepped out from behind the crates.

Thorgar grinned. “Four, is it? Yer gettin’ desperate.”

Then they attacked. The first came at him with a hammer, swinging for his ribs. Thorgar ducked low and slashed across his stomach, spilling his guts onto the floor. The second thug stabbed at him from behind, but Thorgar spun and drove his blade through the man’s throat. Blood sprayed as the thug gurgled, collapsing onto the crates.

The third rushed in too fast, trying to overpower him, but Thorgar smashed his axe into the man’s chest, splitting him open. The fourth one almost had a chance to run. But Thorgar caught him, grabbed him by the collar, and rammed his head against the warehouse wall—twice. The body crumpled to the ground, lifeless.

Four dead men in less than a minute.

Thorgar turned back toward the rich bastard, who had finally risen from his chair.

And this time, he wasn’t smiling.

The rich man unsheathed his sword—a finely crafted rapier, thin and deadly. He stepped forward with a practiced stance, light on his feet.

Thorgar rolled his shoulders.

“So ye do know how to use that thing. Shame it won’t matter.”

The rich man smiled. “You’re a brute, Stonequill. A skilled brute, but still just that. I, on the other hand, have been trained by the finest swordsmen in the realm.”

Thorgar snorted. “Ye talk too much.”

The fight began.

The rich bastard was fast—faster than Thorgar expected. His blade darted in quick, precise thrusts, keeping Thorgar on the defensive.

Thorgar blocked the first strike, dodged the second, but the third slipped past his guard—piercing his side.

Pain flared through him as warm blood soaked his tunic.

He growled and swung hard, aiming to cleave the bastard in two, but the rich man sidestepped, flicking his blade out again—cutting a deep gash along Thorgar's forearm.

Then—Thorgar's boot caught on a loose plank.

He stumbled.

And the rich man saw his opening.

With a vicious lunge, he slammed Thorgar backward. The force sent the dwarf crashing into the wall, wood splintering on impact.

Stars exploded in Thorgar's vision. His head swam, and for a brief second, the pain in his side and arm felt distant.

The rich man stepped closer, blade ready to finish it.

"I told you, dwarf. Some fights can't be won with brute strength alone."

Thorgar grinned through bloody teeth.

"Aye. But brute strength sure don't hurt."

And with a roar, he lunged forward.

The rich man thrust his blade—too late.

Thorgar slammed into him, knocking the wind from his lungs. The sword scraped against his armor but failed to pierce.

Then, with a powerful upward swing, Thorgar drove his sword into the bastard's stomach.

The rich man's eyes widened in shock.

Thorgar yanked the blade upward, splitting flesh, slicing through muscle—and then the intestines spilled onto the floor in a wet heap.

The rich bastard gurgled, eyes full of horror, as he collapsed onto his own guts.

Thorgar stood over him, panting. He wiped the blood from his mouth, staring down at the dying man.

The rich bastard tried to speak. Tried to beg.

Thorgar just watched.

And then, the man went still.

Thorgar exhaled, stepping over the corpse and toward the safe behind the desk.

The lock was sturdy, but a good axe made quick work of it.

Inside—gold. A lot of it.

He counted 300 pieces and stuffed them into his pouch.

A fine reward for a hard-fought battle.

Thorgar left the warehouse full of corpses and made his way back to The Goofy Goose.

He walked in, dropped a few gold coins on the counter, and grinned at Mira.

"Keep the ale flowin'. I got a thirst to drown."

And just like that, one more grudge was settled.

But peace never lasted long for a dwarf like Thorgar.

The door to the tavern swung open, and a group of worried-looking dwarves in mason's aprons stomped inside. They scanned the room, their gazes locking onto him almost immediately.

Thorgar exhaled. "Ah, hells."

One of them, a thick-bearded dwarf with arms like tree trunks, stepped forward. "Ye're Thorgar Stonequill?"

Thorgar took a slow sip of his ale before answering. "Depends. Who's askin'?"

"I'm Borik Ironvein, Stonemason's Guild. We got a problem, and from what I hear, ye're the sort that handles problems."

Thorgar sighed and set down his mug. "If ye tell me this problem involves somethin' that don't want me dead, I'll be mighty disappointed."

Borik exchanged a glance with his companions, then turned back to Thorgar. "Ain't sure what's down there yet. But it's already taken men, and we can't afford to lose more."

Thorgar's grin faded. "Go on."

Beneath Durgul'Um, beneath the streets, beneath even the deepest vaults of the Stonemason's Guild, lay Blackroot Hollow—a forgotten network of ancient underground tunnels.

For centuries, it had been sealed off, dismissed as just another old cave system.

Until a few weeks ago.

During an excavation near the eastern district, workers broke through an ancient stone wall and uncovered a hidden cavern filled with strange trees—black as night, harder than iron.

The Woodworkers' Guild and the Stonemasons had both taken interest.

Blackwood trees, they called them. Their stone-like bark and unbreakable roots made them the perfect material for fortifications, weapons, even ship hulls. If the Hollow held more, it could change the way Durgul'Um built its greatest works.

But there was a problem.

Everyone they sent inside never came back.

The few that did return came back wrong. They whispered of shadows that moved without light. Of voices that spoke in their own heads. Of a hunger that gnawed at their very souls.

Borik leaned closer, his voice low.

"Something's livin' down there, Stonequill. Somethin' old. Somethin' that don't take kindly to folk cuttin' into its domain."

Thorgar ran a thumb along the rim of his mug, thinking. An underground ruin, cursed woods, and lost workers?

Sounded like a death trap.

Sounded like his kind of job.

He smiled. "Alright. Let's see what's hidin' in yer cursed Hollow."

Borik nodded, relief flashing across his face. "Good. We'll take ye to the entrance at dawn. Bring steel, bring torches… and don't go trustin' yer own eyes down there."

At sunrise, Thorgar stood at the mouth of the Hollow.

The entrance was a yawning chasm, framed by jagged stone, wrapped in thick, black roots. Even with torches burning, the darkness inside felt unnatural—heavier than it should be.

Borik clapped him on the shoulder. "Don't get yerself lost."

Thorgar chuckled. "Ye think I'm plannin' to?"

Then he stepped inside.

The cavern stretched wide, its ceiling lost to the black. The blackwood trees grew in tangled knots, their massive roots weaving into the walls, the floor, the ceiling. The bark was cold as stone, and the air was thick with floating spores that blurred his vision if he breathed too deeply.

Thorgar pressed forward, gripping his axe.

Then the first root moved.

A thick tangle of wood twisted, lashing out like a whip. Thorgar barely ducked in time as it struck where his head had been.

The ground shifted. More roots slithered across the floor, curling and coiling, hungry to ensnare him.

Then, from the shadows, something stepped forward.

It had once been a man.

Tattered work clothes still clung to its frame, but its skin was bark-like now, cracked and dark. Its eyes glowed faintly, and when it moved, it was with a jerking, unnatural gait.

A possessed lumberjack.

And it wasn't alone.

From the twisted maze of trees, more figures emerged—former workers, now taken by the Hollow's curse.

Their hands held axes, still rusted from their former trade.

Their mouths opened, but no words came out—only a deep, rattling breath.

Then they charged.

Thorgar gritted his teeth, braced his stance, and swung his axe.

The possessed lumberjacks rushed him with a jerking, unnatural speed, bare feet scraping against the stone, eyes glowing like embers in the dark. Their rusted axes gleamed with dampness, some still stained with dried blood—whether their own or their victims', Thorgar didn't know.

He didn't have time to think about it.

The first one swung high, its axe coming down with the raw strength of a man who had spent his life felling trees. Thorgar barely stepped aside in time. The axe bit deep into the ground where he had stood, sending stone shards flying.

Before the lumberjack could rip the blade free, Thorgar drove his boot into the thing's chest. The impact sent it stumbling back, but it didn't fall.

Its mouth opened in a silent scream, and black veins bulged under its bark-like skin.

From the twisted trees behind them, the roots pulsed.

They were feeding off them. Controlling them.

"Damn rotten magic," Thorgar growled. "Let's see if ye bleed."

The second one attacked from his left.

Thorgar caught the handle of its axe mid-swing, using its own momentum to pull it forward. His elbow slammed into its jaw, knocking it off balance, and before it could recover—his axe was already moving.

The blade sang through the air, carving a deep gash through its side.

The thing let out a horrible rattling noise, but it didn't fall. It staggered back, gripping its wound, and then—

The roots moved.

They coiled around the wounded lumberjack's legs, pulling it upright, tightening like ropes. The wound began to close before Thorgar's eyes.

"Oh, that ain't fair," he muttered.

Then the roots came for him.

They lashed out like whips, thick and black as iron, cracking through the air.

Thorgar dodged one, then another, but the third snapped around his wrist.

The bark was rough, pulsing with unnatural heat. It tightened instantly, pulling him toward the mass of twisting vines at the center of the cavern.

The possessed lumberjacks advanced again, their glowing eyes locked on him, their weapons raised.

Thorgar gritted his teeth, braced his legs, and pulled.

The root held firm. It was dragging him.

So, he did what any proper dwarf would do.

He let it pull him forward—then swung his axe with all the strength in his arm.

The steel bit deep into the root, cutting halfway through before sticking.

The entire Hollow seemed to shudder.

The root tightened in pain, jerking violently—

Then Thorgar twisted the axe and ripped it free.

The root snapped.

Black ichor splattered onto the ground, sizzling like hot tar. The remaining roots flinched away, retreating deeper into the maze.

Thorgar grinned. “Aye. Ye don’t like that, do ye?”

The lumberjacks faltered.

For a moment, they stood perfectly still, their heads tilting as if listening to something.

Then, all at once, they lunged.

Thorgar met them head-on.

His axe sliced through the first one’s neck, severing its head in a single clean stroke.

The second buried its axe into his shoulder, but he barely flinched.

Pain was nothing new to him.

He gripped its wrist, pulled it closer, and sank his blade into its chest.

The thing shuddered, fingers twitching, mouth opening in a silent scream—then it collapsed, lifeless.

The last tried to run.

Thorgar grabbed a discarded hatchet from the ground and threw it.

It buried itself deep in the back of its skull.

Silence fell over the cavern.

The roots had fully withdrawn. The air was still.

For now.

Thorgar wiped his blade clean on his sleeve, exhaling sharply.

“If that was just the entrance, I’m gonna need a stronger drink when I get outta here.”

He turned his gaze toward the deeper tunnels.

Something had created this curse. Something still lurked in the Hollow.

And he was going to find it.

And kill it.

The air grew colder as Thorgar descended deeper into the Hollow. The blackwood trees that had twisted and clawed at him before gave way to a more open space—but not an inviting one.

Before him stretched a vast, underground grove, bathed in eerie blue light.

The trees here were different. Their bark was smooth and pale, almost silver, but cracked with veins of black rot. Their leaves pulsed with an unnatural glow, illuminating the cavern in an eerie twilight.

The ground was wrong.

At first, he thought it was just stone, but as he stepped forward, his boots crunched on something brittle.

Bones.

Hundreds of them, covering the entire forest floor.

Some were old, yellowed, and broken. Others were fresh, still wrapped in scraps of rotted cloth.

And at the center of it all, half-buried in the roots of the largest tree, stood a crumbling elven statue.

Once, it had been majestic—a druid in flowing robes, holding a staff carved with intricate symbols.

Now, it was cracked and defiled, its surface marred with deep claw marks, its eyes hollowed out.

Something had ruined this place.

Something still lived here.

Thorgar gripped his axe tighter.

Then the whispers started.

At first, they were soft.

A breath of wind, the faint murmur of voices.

Then, all at once, they surrounded him.

Whispers slithered through the trees, their words just on the edge of recognition.

"Turn back... it is endless... it is hunger..."

"They took my eyes... I cannot see the light..."

"Thorgar..."

His blood ran cold.

That last one had spoken his name.

He turned sharply, eyes scanning the trees.

There was nothing.

Only shadows moving where there should be none.

Then, from the darkness beyond the trees, something stepped forward.

They had once been warriors.

Their armor was cracked and ancient, their robes hanging in tattered strands.

But their faces were hollow.

Their eyes glowed with the same eerie blue as the trees, and when they raised their hands, their fingers sprouted long, jagged thorns.

They were guardians once.

Now, they were hunters.

One of them raised a hand, and a long, twisted spear of hardened bark grew from its palm. With a sudden, unnatural motion, it hurled the spear toward Thorgar.

He barely had time to dodge before it slammed into a tree behind him, splitting the bark with a deafening crack.

“Aye, alright then. If ye’re gonna start throwin’ things, I’ll just start choppin’.”

Thorgar charged.

The first Hollowborn elf lashed out with vines, but he hacked through them, severing the tendrils with a single, powerful swing.

Another tried to strike from behind, but Thorgar spun, ducked under its clawed fingers, and drove his axe deep into its chest.

There was no blood.

Only black, pulsing sap, thick as tar.

The elf let out a wretched hiss, stumbling back—but it didn’t fall.

Instead, the roots around them pulsed, feeding it strength.

“Oh, aye, I see how this works.”

He tore his axe free and kicked the creature back toward the statue.

If they were feeding on the Hollow, then maybe they could be starved.

The whispers never stopped.

Even as he cut through the Hollowborn, the shadows between the trees twisted, forming into shapes—faint, familiar shapes.

They moved like men. Like adventurers.

One of them had the build of a dwarf, a hammer strapped to its back.

Another wore the robes of a wizard, its head tilted as if watching him.

But their faces were empty.

And their voices were his own.

"This is where it ends..."

"You are already dead..."

Thorgar gritted his teeth.

He had faced ghosts before.

He knew a trap when he saw one.

“Nice try, lads. But I don’t take advice from shadows.”

He swung his axe through the nearest wraith.

It dissolved like smoke, but its voice lingered, curling around his ears.

"The staff... find the staff..."

Thorgar froze.

That voice was different.

It wasn’t mocking.

It wasn’t trying to trick him.

It was guiding him.

The elven statue at the center of the grove was damaged, defiled—but not broken.

And at its base, half-buried in the roots, something gleamed.

A staff.

Not made of wood, not exactly—it was something older, something twisted with both life and death.

The moment he saw it, the Hollowborn turned toward him, hissing in rage.

They knew.

And they were afraid.

Thorgar grinned.

“Aye. That’s what I thought.”

With one final, mighty swing, he ripped the cursed roots apart and seized the staff.

The moment his fingers closed around it, the Hollow screamed.

The trees shuddered.

The light pulsed, flickering.

And deep in the Hollow, something else stirred.

Something older.

Something that knew he was coming.

The air grew thick and heavy as Thorgar descended into the deepest chamber of Blackroot Hollow. His boots crunched over rotting bark and brittle bones, the light from his torch flickering uncertainly against the pulsating, vein-like roots that lined the cavern walls.

The trees here were twisted beyond recognition—no longer simply wood, but something alive, something watching. Every step felt as though he was walking into the open mouth of some waiting beast.

And at the center of it all, he saw it.

The Blackroot Heart.

It loomed like a colossal, ancient tree, but its bark was black as coal, its roots twisting through the stone like massive, grasping fingers. Deep within the cracks of its bark, a red glow pulsed—like a beating heart, slow and terrible.

The Hollow's true master.

Thorgar gritted his teeth, gripping the druid's staff tighter.

"Aye. I was hopin' for a nice, simple curse to break. But no. Had to be a bloody tree demon."

The cavern trembled.

A voice, deep and gnarled, like wind through dead branches, filled the air.

"Intruder. Defiler. You will not leave this place."

The roots around him twisted and writhed, pulling free from the earth.

Then the Blackroot Guardian awoke.

The ground split open as the creature rose from the heart of the tree, a monstrous fusion of wood and beast. Its body was massive, its limbs twisted like gnarled oak, and its eyes burned with sickly green fire.

A massive greatclub, made from petrified wood, was clenched in one of its hulking fists. When it moved, the entire cavern shook.

Thorgar rolled his shoulders.

"Alright, ye oversized pile o' kindling. Let's see if ye burn."

The guardian lunged.

Thorgar barely dodged as the greatclub smashed into the ground, sending splinters of stone and wood flying in all directions.

Before he could react, thorns erupted from the walls, slamming toward him like spears.

He twisted, ducked, and rolled, avoiding most of them—but one sliced across his shoulder, cutting deep.

He grunted through the pain, blood dripping onto the cursed earth.

Then the guardian inhaled, its chest swelling.

A cloud of thick, blinding pollen exploded outward.

Thorgar gagged, coughing as the air turned heavy and choking. His eyes watered, his vision blurred.

Then—a massive hand closed around him.

The guardian had grabbed him.

It lifted him high, roots writhing beneath its bark-like flesh, its glowing eyes boring into him.

“Be consumed.”

Thorgar snarled, gripping his axe tight—and with a roar, he swung.

The blade bit deep into the creature’s wrist, splitting bark, severing roots.

The guardian howled, dropping him as black sap gushed from the wound.

Thorgar hit the ground hard, rolling to his feet.

He needed a plan—fast.

Thorgar glanced toward the Blackroot Heart, still pulsing in the cavern wall.

The tree was feeding the beast, regenerating its wounds, keeping it alive.

“So that’s yer little secret.”

He dug into his belt pouch, fingers closing around the last of his fire bombs. A gift from a gnome tinkerer he’d once helped.

It was small, metal, filled with alchemical oil.

One good hit, and the whole damned tree would burn.

He dashed toward the heart, dodging another swing of the greatclub. A massive branch broke loose from the ceiling, crashing down just behind him.

The cavern was starting to collapse.

The guardian roared, sensing what he was about to do. It lunged, roots bursting from the ground to entangle him—

But Thorgar leapt, fire bomb in hand.

With a mighty swing, he hurled it straight into the Blackroot Heart.

The explosion ripped through the cavern.

Flames erupted from the wound in the tree, spreading fast, consuming the roots, licking up the walls.

The guardian screamed.

Its body convulsed, thrashing, splitting apart as the flames ate into it.

Its limbs fell away.

Its club crumbled into ashes.

And then, with a final, earth-shaking roar, it collapsed into fire and ruin.

The Blackroot Heart burned, and with it, the curse of the Hollow was broken.

The cavern groaned, splitting apart. The very roots that had once held it together were now turning to ash.

Thorgar didn't wait to admire his work.

He ran.

Falling branches crashed around him. Flames licked at his heels.

The corridors twisted, the Hollow fighting to trap him even in its final death throes.

But he pushed forward, through the burning ruins, through the choking smoke—

Until finally, he saw light.

With one last, desperate leap, Thorgar burst free from the Hollow, rolling onto solid ground as the tunnel behind him collapsed.

For a long moment, he just lay there, staring up at the cavern ceiling.

Then he grinned.

"Hells. That was a good fight."

When Thorgar returned to the Stonemasons' Guild, the entire city had already heard what he'd done.

The curse was lifted. The Hollow was sealed. And no more workers would vanish into the dark.

Borik Ironvein, his arms crossed, just shook his head in disbelief.

“Ye’re a stubborn bastard, Stonequill. But ye get the job done.”

Thorgar chuckled, holding up his reward—a chunk of petrified wood from the Blackroot Guardian’s remains.

“Aye. And I expect a drink on the house fer savin’ yer guild.”

Borik grinned. “Aye. That, ye’ve earned.”

As the cheers of the workers echoed through the halls, Thorgar raised his tankard.

Another grudge settled. Another legend written.

But he had no doubt—

The next adventure was already waiting for him.

Somewhere.

The Goofy Goose had seen many wild nights, but tonight, the dwarves drank like a war had been won.

And in a way, it had.

The Hollow was broken. The curse was lifted. And the blackwood trees that once devoured men were now being harvested, shaped into weapons, ships, and fortifications.

And at the center of the celebration, laughing through a mouthful of ale, sat Thorgar Stonequill.

“Aye, so there I was, up to me beard in roots, this damn tree beast swingin’ a club the size of a wagon at me head—”

“Bah! Ye exaggerate!” a nearby dwarf interrupted. “Ye weren’t up to yer beard! Maybe up to yer knees!”

Thorgar grinned, taking another swig. “Well, aye, but me knees were havin’ a real bad day, so same thing.”

The whole table roared with laughter.

At least ten dwarves were crammed around him, tankards sloshing, beards dripping with ale, some pounding the table in amusement while others leaned in, eager for more of the tale.

The tavern doors swung open, and a burly, soot-covered dwarf stomped inside, carrying something wrapped in thick leather.

His beard was blackened with coal dust, and his massive arms bore the scars of a thousand burns.

It was Durn Ironthumb, master smith of Durgul'Um.

He strode right up to Thorgar's table and dropped the heavy bundle onto the wood with a solid thud.

"Stonequill, ye reckless bastard. Ye went into the Hollow and came back alive. So I figured ye deserve somethin' to remember it by."

Thorgar leaned forward, raising an eyebrow.

With a quick pull, Durn unwrapped the bundle—revealing a weapon unlike any other.

The Blackroot Axe.

Its handle was dark, twisted wood, smooth as steel but warm to the touch. The blade was sharp enough to split stone, its edge gleaming with a faint, eerie glow.

It was both natural and unnatural—alive in a way no ordinary weapon should be.

Thorgar whistled. "Now that's a fine piece of murder."

Durn grinned. "Aye, made straight from the Hollow's heartwood. Ye could cut through an anvil with that thing and barely dull the edge."

Thorgar picked it up, turning it over in his hands, feeling the perfect balance, the weight, the raw power in the wood.

Then, without a word, he reached to his belt, unhooked his old handaxe, and set it down.

"Well, looks like I just got meself a new favorite."

The tavern erupted in cheers.

Mugs clashed together, ale spilled across the tables, and a barrel was tapped just for the occasion.

The dwarves drank like it was their last night on earth.

At one table, a broad-shouldered dwarf named Magrin Stoutgut was already five tankards deep, laughing so hard ale foamed from his nose.

Across the room, two red-bearded brothers—Togar and Broldin—were having an arm-wrestling match so intense, the table they were using had begun to splinter.

A wild-haired dwarf named Snorri the Mad was standing on a chair, loudly reciting terrible poetry.

“Oh Blackroot tree, so old, so grand, Ye tried to kill our friend’s strong hand! But he cut ye down, so full of might, And now we drink all bloody night!”

A tankard hit Snorri in the side of the head, thrown by someone who had clearly had enough of the poetry.

Snorri just took a sip from it, unfazed.

In the corner, a grizzled, one-eyed dwarf named Old Geddric was recounting some half-believable tale of how he had once fought a basilisk bare-handed.

“Aye, turned me leg to stone! But did that stop me? No! I just walked it off!”

Another dwarf raised an eyebrow. “Ye mean ye hopped it off.”

“Same thing!”

A fight broke out at one point—because of course it did.

Someone had accidentally spilled ale on another dwarf’s boots, and before anyone could blink, fists were flying, chairs were breaking, and Mira the barkeep was smacking heads together until order was restored.

Through it all, Thorgar laughed, drank, and soaked in every moment.

For weeks, he had fought monsters, braved curses, and risked life and limb.

Now, he was doing what dwarves did best.

Drinking. Feasting. And celebrating victory.

The Goofy Goose roared with life until long past midnight, and when the last mug was emptied and the last dwarf had passed out in his chair, Thorgar leaned back with a satisfied sigh.

“Aye. That was a good night.”

He ran a calloused hand over the Blackroot Axe, feeling the strength in its wood, the weight in its grip.

Kings Road

Thorgar hadn’t meant to go looking for trouble.

He had meant to walk off his hangover, maybe buy a fresh pipe of Redvine, and take in the city for once without someone trying to kill him.

But Durgul'Um had other plans.

The streets were restless, buzzing with hushed conversations and uneasy glances. Banners hung lower than usual, many dyed black in mourning. The air smelled of iron and stone, but beneath it, there was something else—

Tension.

Something was wrong.

And then, as he passed through the Grand Market, a nobleman stepped into his path.

He was tall for a dwarf, draped in heavy robes lined with silver embroidery. His beard was braided neatly, his fingers adorned with rings that spoke of wealth and influence.

But it was his eyes that gave Thorgar pause.

They weren't the soft, calculating eyes of a noble who lived off gold and empty words. They were sharp, piercing—like a man who knew the weight of steel as well as he knew the weight of coin.

"Thorgar Stonequill, I presume."

Thorgar sighed, rubbing his temples. "Aye, what's it to ye? If ye need a tavern wrecked, I'm off duty."

The noble gave a small, knowing smile.

"I know your name from the guild halls. Your reputation precedes you. You are a warrior of action, of honor—and that is exactly the kind of man our kingdom needs."

Thorgar narrowed his eyes. "Needs for what, exactly?"

The noble stepped closer, lowering his voice.

"The king is dead, Stonequill. And if we do not act soon, Durgul'Um will tear itself apart."

King Durnhelm Ironbeard was a ruler of wisdom and strength, but his death had left a void that no dwarf had yet been able to fill.

Now, three noble houses claimed the throne, each arguing that their lineage, their wealth, or their strength made them the rightful rulers of Durgul'Um.

The Council of Elders—the only ones who could decide—had been arguing for weeks. If they failed to choose soon, the noble houses would take matters into their own hands.

And that meant war.

“I am Lord Keldric Runehammer, an advisor to the Council,” the noble continued. “There are three houses vying for the throne. None of them trust one another, but they might trust you. If you help uncover the true heir, you may be able to stop bloodshed before it begins.”

Thorgar crossed his arms. “And if I don’t?”

Keldric’s expression darkened.

“Then our great city will drown in its own blood.”

Each house had its own claim to the throne, and each wanted Thorgar’s support.

House Bronzeblade – The Warrior’s Claim. The strongest military house, boasting the most disciplined warriors and the finest weapons. They believe strength alone should rule, arguing that a king must be able to defend his throne with his own blade. Their leader, Lord Varrik Bronzeblade, is a fierce warrior, but stubborn as a mountain.

House Gemvein – The Merchant’s Claim. The wealthiest house, controlling trade, mining rights, and coin. They argue that Durgul’Um needs an economic king, one who can fund the army, the guilds, and expand their influence. Their matriarch, Lady Valma Gemvein, is cold, calculating, and dangerously intelligent.

House Deepdelver – The Traditionalist’s Claim. The oldest house, deeply tied to dwarven customs, lore, and religion. They believe the king must be chosen based on ancient traditions, not war or coin. Their leader, Thane Borgrim Deepdelver, is a respected elder but lacks power outside the priesthood.

Keldric clasped his hands together.

“Each house has invited you to speak with them, hoping to win your favor. They see you as a warrior, a legend—someone who does not lie, someone who does not scheme.”

Thorgar snorted. “Aye, ‘cause it’s much easier to swing an axe through a liar than be one.”

Keldric smiled. “Exactly. They will try to convince you to support their claim. But the truth is, Stonequill—” He leaned in. “There is another. A hidden heir. And if they are still alive, they are the rightful ruler of Durgul’Um.”

Thorgar’s brow furrowed. “And where might this ‘rightful ruler’ be?”

Keldric glanced around, then whispered,

“Lost to history. But if we search the Great Library, we may find the proof we need before it’s too late.”

Thorgar took a long breath.

He had fought beasts, machines, and curses.

But dwarven politics?

This might be his greatest battle yet.

He cracked his knuckles, then smiled at Keldric.

“Alright, noble. Ye got me interest. Let’s see which one o’ these bastards is worth a damn.”

Thorgar never liked nobles.

They talked too much, drank too little, and always had too many guards. But if he was going to stop a civil war before it started, he had to hear them out.

And if they tried to bribe, threaten, or trick him?

Well, that’d just make things fun.

Thorgar stepped into the Bronzeblade estate, a fortress within the city, where banners of red and gold hung from the halls, and dwarven warriors trained in the courtyards.

Lord Varrik Bronzeblade stood waiting, a mountain of muscle wrapped in steel armor, his gray-streaked beard braided like a warrior of old.

“Stonequill, I’ve heard of ye. A man who lets his axe speak.” He grinned, gripping Thorgar’s forearm in a warrior’s handshake. “Good. We need more dwarves like that on the throne.”

Thorgar snorted. “Aye? Ye plannin’ to put one there?”

Varrik’s smile didn’t fade.

“Durgul’Um needs a king of steel, not parchment. War is coming—if not now, then soon. The elves press our borders, the orcs grow bolder, and weak rulers have made us soft.”

He gestured to the warriors training below.

“I have the men. I have the weapons. I will make our kingdom strong again.”

Thorgar crossed his arms. “Aye. And what o’ the guilds, the traders, the common folk? They ain’t soldiers. Ye plannin’ to rule with a hammer alone?”

Varrik chuckled.

“They’ll fall in line when they see the strength of a true king.”

Translation: Obey or die.

Thorgar hated that.

Then, a servant quietly handed Varrik a note. The lord read it, his brows furrowing, before crushing the parchment in his fist.

Thorgar raised an eyebrow. “Bad news?”

Varrik grunted. “Nothing ye need worry about.”

But Thorgar had seen something written on the note before it was crushed.

‘The Council has been bought. The Gemveins move faster than we thought.’

So House Gemvein was bribing people.

Interesting.

The Gemvein manor wasn’t a fortress.

It was a palace.

Gold trimmed the furniture, gemstones glittered in the chandeliers, and the air smelled of expensive perfumes instead of honest forge-smoke.

Lady Valma Gemvein sat at a marble table, her fingers idly turning a ruby ring as Thorgar entered.

“Ah, the famous Stonequill. Please, sit.”

Thorgar didn’t. “I like to stand. Easier to leave if I get bored.”

Valma smiled.

“A practical dwarf. Good. Let’s be practical, then. The throne belongs to those who can support it. Without coin, there is no army. No trade. No city.”

She leaned forward.

“I can offer stability. The guilds support me. The merchants follow me. With me as queen, Durgul’Um will prosper. And you—” She lifted a heavy coin pouch from the table. “—will find yourself well rewarded for your support.”

Thorgar raised an eyebrow. “Ye tryna buy me, Lady Gemvein?”

She smiled. “Oh, not at all. I’m simply rewarding good decisions.”

Thorgar picked up the pouch, weighed it in his hand—then tossed it onto the floor.

The guards stiffened.

Valma’s smile didn’t falter.

“Ah. A man of principle. How refreshing.”

Thorgar grinned. “Nay, I just don’t work for folk who bribe the Council behind closed doors.”

For the first time, her expression flickered.

Thorgar turned and walked out.

Now he knew for sure—House Gemvein was trying to buy the throne.

But would the Council sell it?

The Deepdelver clan lived humbly—too humbly for royalty.

Their hall was ancient, filled with stone carvings and worn banners that spoke of old dwarven traditions.

Thane Borgrim Deepdelver was older than the others, his beard pure white, his back slightly hunched, but his eyes still sharp.

“Stonequill. I know why ye’ve come.”

Thorgar nodded. “Aye. Ye want the throne. But what makes ye the rightful king?”

Borgrim sighed. “Not me. My son.”

Thorgar blinked. “Ye got a son? I ain’t heard o’ him.”

Borgrim’s face darkened.

“Because he was exiled. Branded a traitor for a crime he did not commit. If he were here, the throne would be his by ancient law.”

Thorgar frowned. “And where is he now?”

Borgrim exhaled. “Lost. But I believe the Great Library holds the truth. If his innocence is proven, the throne is his by blood.”

Thorgar stroked his beard.

The other houses were fighting for power.

But this? This was a missing heir.

And that meant one thing.

Someone had erased him from history—on purpose.

Thorgar knew the real answers wouldn’t be found in fancy halls or whispered bribes.

They’d be in the oldest records, deep within the Great Library of Durgul’Um.

The library was massive, carved into the mountain itself, its halls lined with stone tablets, scrolls, and ancient books—many untouched for centuries.

Keldric Runehammer met him at the entrance, holding a lantern.

“Ye found somethin’?” Thorgar asked.

Keldric nodded. “Aye. But someone doesn’t want us to. I had to bribe a scribe to even get access.”

Thorgar grinned. “Aye, bribin’ a bribed Council. That’s poetic.”

They descended into the archives, past dust-covered shelves and forgotten histories.

After hours of searching they found a single, torn page from an old royal ledger.

It read:

"Prince Drakmir Deepdelver, rightful heir, exiled under false charges. To speak his name is treason."

Thorgar exhaled slowly.

The heir was real. And someone had tried to erase him.

Then—a sound behind them. The doors slammed shut. Boots echoed on the stone floor.

Thorgar turned, hand on his axe.

Figures emerged from the shadows—cloaked, armored, and armed. An assassin. One of them drew a curved dagger, stepping forward.

“You’ve learned too much, Stonequill. This is where your story ends.”

Thorgar grinned.

“Aye? Funny. I was just about to say the same to ye.”

He drew his Blackroot Axe. The fight was on.

The moment the assassin’s words left his lips, Thorgar was already moving.

His Blackroot Axe sang through the air, its razor-sharp edge catching the dim lantern light as it whistled toward the first attacker.

The assassin barely dodged, stepping back as the blade bit deep into the stone pillar behind him, sending shards of rock flying.

"Bah! Shoulda stayed in the shadows, lads, ‘cause now ye gotta fight me in the open!" Thorgar grinned, yanking his axe free.

There were five of them.

Quick. Trained. Armed.

But Thorgar had fought worse.

The first assassin lunged, twin daggers flashing.

Thorgar parried the first strike with the haft of his axe, then stepped inside his guard, slamming his forehead into the bastard's nose.

A sickening crack filled the air as the assassin stumbled back, blood streaming from his face.

Before he could recover, Thorgar drove his axe into the man's gut, carving through leather armor like butter.

The assassin let out a gurgled breath, then collapsed.

One down.

The second came from the side, slashing toward Thorgar's ribs.

He twisted, the blade slicing through the leather of his coat but missing flesh.

Before the assassin could strike again, Keldric Runehammer stepped in, grabbing the attacker's wrist and twisting hard.

The assassin yelled in pain, dropping the dagger—just in time for Thorgar to punch him straight in the throat.

He choked, gasping, and Thorgar finished the job with a kick to the chest, sending him crashing into a bookshelf.

Two down.

But the others were closing in fast.

And something wasn't right.

One of them—the leader—wasn't attacking.

Instead, he had turned toward the library walls, running his fingers along the old stonework.

"Oi! Ye lost?" Thorgar barked, dodging another blade.

The assassin pressed something.

The stone wall behind him shuddered.

And then—with the groan of ancient gears—a hidden passage slid open.

Thorgar’s eyes widened.

"Oh, ye bastards knew about that, did ye?"

The leader smiled, then bolted into the darkness.

The others followed.

Keldric cursed. "They're running!"

Thorgar spat blood onto the floor, shaking the pain from his bruised knuckles.

"Aye, let 'em. Just means they’ll die tired."

Then, without another word, he grabbed a lantern and charged into the tunnels.

The passage wound deep beneath Durgul’Um, the air thick with dust, the walls lined with carvings so old they were barely legible.

Keldric ran alongside him, panting.

"By Moradin’s beard… these tunnels must be ancient!"

Thorgar grunted. "Aye. And I’m guessin’ these assassins know more about ‘em than we do."

The tunnels split into multiple paths, but the assassins’ footsteps echoed ahead, guiding the chase.

Suddenly—a crossbow bolt shot past Thorgar’s ear, shattering against the stone.

"OI! YE MISSED!" Thorgar roared, sprinting forward.

The assassins had stopped at a larger chamber, waiting for them.

One stood on a broken statue, crossbow reloaded.

The others were positioned on either side of the tunnel, weapons ready.

And at the far end—another passage deeper into the ruins.

The leader smiled. "This is where you die, Stonequill."

Thorgar grinned.

"Funny. Last man who told me that died screamin’."

And then, the fight started again.

Thorgar charged first, dodging another crossbow bolt before throwing his axe full-force.

It spun through the air, embedding itself in the crossbowman’s chest.

The assassin toppled from the statue, landing with a sickening crunch.

Keldric blocked a dagger strike, countering with a punch that sent another assassin sprawling.

One came at Thorgar from behind, but the dwarf ducked, spun, and yanked his axe free from the corpse—

Just in time to bury it into his attacker’s skull.

Another tried to run.

Thorgar grabbed him by the collar, slammed him against the wall, and pressed his axe to his throat.

"Ye lot ain't runnin’ anywhere. Start talkin’. Who sent ye?"

The assassin spat blood, laughing.

"You’re already too late."

Thorgar tightened his grip. "Too late for what?"

The assassin’s smile widened.

"The job's already done. The claimant is dead."

Thorgar’s stomach turned to ice.

"Which one?"

The assassin coughed, choking on his own blood.

Then, with a final, raspy breath—he died.

Thorgar let the corpse drop.

"Moradin’s stones."

Keldric wiped his brow. "If they were telling the truth… one of the noble claimants is dead."

Thorgar stormed out of the Great Library, boots slamming against the cobblestone as the city of Durgul’Um erupted into chaos.

Alarm bells rang. The streets buzzed with panicked voices. From the distant halls of the noble houses, banners were unfurled, their colors fluttering like war drums waiting to be struck.

This wasn’t just a power struggle anymore.

Someone had just made the first kill.

Keldric Runehammer rushed beside him, out of breath.

“Stonequill, we need to find out who died. If the wrong house was struck, this whole city’s gonna collapse into war before sundown.”

Thorgar gritted his teeth, adjusting the grip on his axe.

"Aye. And whoever ordered it is gonna have their teeth kicked in by mornin'."

It didn’t take long to find out who had fallen.

The streets were thick with murmuring crowds, city guards pushing them back from the gates of House Deepdelver.

Thorgar’s stomach sank.

If it was House Deepdelver, that meant Borgrim’s exiled son had never even had a chance to claim his right.

He elbowed past the onlookers.

A guard stepped in his path, gripping a halberd.

"No one enters! The Thane of Deepdelver is in mourning!"

Thorgar snorted. "Aye? And I suppose ye lot are just gonna stand around while the kingdom falls apart?"

Keldric stepped forward, flashing the Council’s seal.

"By order of the Council, we’re going in. Move aside."

The guard hesitated. Then, with a grunt, he stepped aside.

The air inside was thick with the scent of burning incense. Mourning candles lined the hallways, their flames flickering against stone walls carved with old dwarven runes.

Servants whispered in hushed tones.

Thorgar entered the main hall, where Borgrim Deepdelver sat on his throne-like stone chair, shoulders heavy with grief.

The old dwarf looked up at them, eyes red, beard unbraided in mourning.

"He’s dead, Stonequill."

Thorgar steeled himself.

"Tell me what happened."

Borgrim exhaled sharply, voice raw.

"My son… my only boy. Drakmir. He returned last night. Said he was ready to make his claim. I told him he needed allies first. We spoke for hours…"

His hands clenched into fists.

"And then, before dawn, someone slit his throat in his sleep."

Silence settled in the hall.

Thorgar's jaw tightened. "No struggle?"

Borgrim shook his head. "None. The guards saw nothing. The door was locked. The windows barred. It was as if a ghost did it."

Keldric frowned. "No ghost slit his throat, Thane. This was an assassin's work."

Borgrim's grief shifted to fury.

"It was House Gemvein!" he roared. "That conniving she-devil Valma wanted my son dead before he could make his claim!"

Thorgar stroked his beard.

"Aye, Valma's got the Council in her pocket, but this ain't her style. She bribes, she manipulates, she poisons with words, not daggers."

Borgrim slammed his fist against the stone table.

"Then it was Bronzeblade! He'd rather see a dead Deepdelver than a crowned one!"

Thorgar exhaled. "Maybe. Or maybe someone wants ye both at each other's throats so they can take the throne themselves."

Borgrim narrowed his eyes.

"Then we find them. And we make them pay."

Thorgar nodded.

"Aye. But first, we need proof."

Word spread like wildfire.

By midday, House Bronzeblade and House Deepdelver were on the edge of battle. Deepdelver dwarves lined the streets in full armor, axes and shields in hand, their banners raised in mourning and anger. Bronzeblade warriors gathered outside their fortress,

sharpening blades, donning helmets, preparing for an inevitable fight. The Council of Elders was in chaos, some calling for peace, others already choosing sides. House Gemvein remained quiet, its doors closed—but Thorgar knew better. Quiet nobles were the most dangerous ones.

Keldric turned to Thorgar.

"We need to move fast. If we don't find the assassin before nightfall, the first axe will fall, and then there's no stopping it."

Thorgar cracked his knuckles.

"Then let's start with the corpse."

Drakmir's body lay on a stone slab, wrapped in mourning cloth.

Thorgar pulled the fabric back, exposing the wound.

A single, clean slice across the throat. No hesitation. No struggle.

He frowned. This wasn't a hasty kill. This was precise. Professional.

His fingers traced the wound carefully.

Then, he saw it.

A thin, almost invisible trace of dark powder along the cut.

Keldric's eyes widened. "Poisoned."

Thorgar grunted. "Aye. And not just any poison. That's widow's breath. Assassin's work. Professional."

Borgrim gripped the hilt of his axe.

"Where do we find them?"

Thorgar exhaled.

"There's only one place in Durgul'Um where assassins buy widow's breath. The Black Mist Den."

Borgrim nodded. "Then we go there. Now."

The streets of Durgul'Um were restless, heavy with the weight of war that had yet to begin.

Thorgar could feel it in the air—the way the city held its breath, waiting for the first axe to fall. If they didn't act fast, the whole mountain would drown in dwarven blood.

And so, they went straight to the Black Mist Den.

Not with caution.

Not with stealth.

But with axes drawn and murder in their eyes.

The Den wasn't a marked building or a well-known establishment.

It was hidden deep beneath the city, in a seedy network of tunnels beneath the Old Market, where the worst of Durgul'Um's filth gathered.

Thorgar led the way, Borgrim at his side, Keldric just behind them.

The entrance was guarded by two hooded figures, hands resting on curved daggers coated with dark oil.

One of them smiled.

"Now there's a pair o' faces we don't usually see down here."

Thorgar didn't slow. He didn't stop to bargain, didn't stop to argue.

He just grabbed the first one by the collar, slammed his head into the stone wall, and let him crumple like a sack of potatoes.

The other drew his dagger—too slow.

Borgrim smashed his shield into the bastard's gut, sending him wheezing to the ground.

Thorgar kicked open the door.

"Oi! We're here for a talk. So which one of ye bastards is in a chatty mood?"

Inside, the Black Mist Den was a den of criminals, assassins, and worse.

Hushed conversations stopped. Figures in dark cloaks turned toward them, hands slipping toward concealed weapons.

At the back of the room, seated behind a table of fine silks and scattered gold, was Madam Sylessa.

A half-drow, half-dwarf, with piercing silver eyes and a smile like a dagger.

She leaned back in her chair, unbothered by the sudden intrusion.

"Well, well. The mighty Thorgar Stonequill, covered in blood and smelling of cheap ale. If I'd known ye were coming, I'd have put out the fancy glasses."

Thorgar cracked his neck.

"Aye? Then ye might as well pour me one, ‘cause this ain’t a friendly visit. I’ve got a corpse with widow’s breath in his throat, and ye lot are the only bastards in this city who sell it."

Sylessa’s smile widened.

"Widow’s breath, eh? Nasty stuff. Expensive. Not just anyone can afford it."

Borgrim stepped forward, voice like thunder.

"Who bought it? Tell us, or I’ll carve the answer from yer bones."

Sylessa sighed.

"Ah, threats. So unoriginal. But, lucky for you, I do enjoy a bit of chaos."

She gestured to one of her men, who disappeared into a back room and returned with a ledger.

She ran a painted nail down the page.

Then, she laughed.

"Oh. Now this is interesting."

She turned the ledger toward them, tapping a name.

Thorgar’s stomach tightened.

Because it wasn’t Bronzeblade.

It wasn’t Gemvein.

It was one of the Council members.

Eldric Frostmantle.

A man who was supposed to be neutral.

A man who had claimed he wanted to stop a war.

And yet, here it was—proof that he had ordered the assassination.

Keldric’s eyes went wide.

"The Council is playing its own game."

Borgrim tightened his grip on his axe.

"Then we put an end to it."

The Council of Elders met in a grand hall carved from the heart of the mountain, where ancient laws were written in stone and debate was meant to settle disputes.

Thorgar kicked open the doors instead.

The elders turned in shock, murmuring as the three bloodstained dwarves stormed into the chamber.

Eldric Frostmantle was seated at the long stone table, his expression carefully neutral.

Thorgar threw the ledger onto the table.

"I don’t have the patience for diplomacy, so let’s skip to the part where ye explain why yer name is in that book."

The room went silent.

Eldric folded his hands.

"Stonequill, be careful what you accuse an Elder of."

Borgrim slammed a dagger into the table, inches from Eldric’s hand.

"My son is dead, ye rat. If ye don’t start talkin’, I’ll start cutting."

Eldric’s expression didn’t change.

Then, he sighed.

"It was necessary."

Keldric’s eyes widened. "You admit it?"

Eldric stood, brushing imaginary dust from his robes.

"Drakmir was a relic of an old age. If he had taken the throne, it would have split the kingdom apart. I did what had to be done—to protect Durgul’Um."

Thorgar felt his fingers tighten around his axe.

"Ye murdered an innocent dwarf to ‘protect the kingdom’?"

Eldric tilted his head.

"One life to prevent thousands from dying in war? A fair trade, don’t you think?"

Borgrim roared and lunged—

Thorgar caught him, holding him back.

Not because he wanted to.

But because this wasn’t done yet.

"Ye made one mistake, Frostmantle."

Eldric raised an eyebrow. "And what was that?"

Thorgar grinned.

"Ye thought we'd let ye get away with it."

Eldric Frostmantle smiled.

Not the smile of a man caught in a crime. Not the smile of a dwarf who regretted his choices.

It was the smile of someone who thought he had already won.

"And what do you plan to do now, Stonequill?" Eldric asked, folding his hands. "Drag me through the streets? Shout your accusations to the common folk? You think the people will listen to a sellsword over the wisdom of the Council?"

Borgrim growled. "Ye admit to murder, and ye think ye can talk yer way out of it?"

Eldric shrugged. "Not talk. Rule. I serve Durgul’Um, and I did what was necessary. No one will mourn Drakmir Deepdelver. He was a relic, an inconvenience. He would have led us to ruin."

Thorgar rolled his shoulders, gripping his axe tighter.

"Aye. Ye keep sayin’ ‘necessary’ like it makes ye less of a backstabbin’ snake."

Keldric glanced around. The other Council members looked uneasy, shifting in their seats, unwilling to speak. They had no love for Eldric, but fear? Fear kept them silent.

Eldric sighed. "Enough of this. Guards!"

The doors burst open, and a dozen city guards flooded into the chamber, weapons drawn.

Eldric gestured lazily toward Thorgar and Borgrim.

"Arrest them."

The first guard stepped forward, gripping his halberd.

He hesitated.

Thorgar grinned. "Aye, lad. If ye don’t want to end up pissin’ out yer teeth, I’d rethink that."

Another guard, younger, looked at Borgrim.

"Thane Deepdelver, sir, this… this ain’t right."

Borgrim nodded. "Aye, lad. Then do somethin’ about it."

The guard exchanged a look with his comrades.

Then—half of them turned on their own.

"We ain't arrestin' honest dwarves while a murderer sits in that chair," one said, raising his axe.

Chaos erupted.

Thorgar moved first, swinging his Blackroot Axe. The nearest loyalist guard tried to block, but the enchanted wood sheared straight through steel.

The table overturned. Elders scrambled for cover.

Borgrim tore through two guards like a charging ram, smashing one into the stone wall with his shield.

Keldric disarmed another, knocking the sword from his grip before breaking his nose with an elbow strike.

Eldric, to his credit, didn’t panic.

He simply turned and walked toward the back of the chamber, slipping into a hidden passage.

Thorgar spotted him.

"OI! Ye don’t get to leave when things go south!"

He smashed a guard’s helmet in with the blunt side of his axe, then shoved his way toward the passage.

Borgrim grabbed his arm. "Ye after him?"

"Aye. Keep the Council hall under control. I’ll handle Frostmantle."

Borgrim nodded, then turned back to the fight, roaring orders to the rebels.

Thorgar disappeared into the dark after Eldric.

The tunnel wound deep into the mountain, its walls old, covered in dust, long unused.

Thorgar’s boots echoed as he ran.

Ahead, torchlight flickered.

Eldric’s voice called out.

"You’re persistent, I’ll give you that, Stonequill. But you should know better. There is no honor in politics. No victory in truth. Only power."

Thorgar rounded a corner—just as a blade shot toward his throat.

He barely dodged, the dagger slashing across his shoulder instead.

Blood splattered against the stone.

Eldric stood waiting, his robe cast aside, revealing light armor beneath.

In his hand, he held a slender, wickedly curved rapier.

Thorgar grunted, rolling his shoulder.

"So. Ye don’t just hide behind words and coin. Ye fight, too. I almost respect that."

Eldric smiled again, cold as steel.

"I have no choice now, do I? You’ve forced my hand."

Thorgar grinned, raising his axe.

"Aye. And now I’m gonna cut it off."

Eldric moved like a shadow, fast, precise. His rapier stabbed forward, aiming for gaps in Thorgar’s armor.

But Thorgar was no slow-witted brute.

He sidestepped the first thrust, then brought his axe down like a hammer.

Eldric twisted away, the blade barely missing him.

"Too slow."

Thorgar snorted. "Aye? Try blockin’ this, then."

He feinted left, then swung right. Eldric dodged—but the axe clipped his side, slicing through fabric and drawing blood.

Eldric hissed, stepping back.

For the first time, his confidence wavered.

Thorgar pressed forward.

"Ye ain’t fightin’ a council debate, lad. Ye’re fightin’ a dwarf who’s spent his life killin’ bastards like ye."

Eldric lunged in desperation.

Thorgar caught the rapier between the haft of his axe and his bracer, twisting it aside.

Then, with one brutal headbutt, he cracked Eldric’s nose.

The noble staggered back, stunned.

Thorgar didn’t give him time to recover.

With a mighty swing, his axe carved deep into Eldric’s ribs.

The noble gasped, dropping his rapier.

Thorgar kicked him to the ground.

Eldric clutched his wound, coughing blood and shat himself. His smile was gone.

"This… this is not how it was meant to end."

Thorgar squatted down, resting his axe on his knee.

"Aye? That’s the thing about plottin’, lad. Plans don’t mean a damn thing when ye’re dead."

Eldric choked, blinking up at him.

"Kill me, then. Do it."

Thorgar considered.

Then, he stood.

"Nay. Ye’re gonna stand trial. Ye’re gonna watch as the people spit on yer name. And then, if I’m lucky, I’ll get to see the execution meself."

He grabbed Eldric by the scruff of his armor, hauling him to his feet.

"Now, let’s get ye back to the Council Hall. Yer throne’s waitin’ for ye."

With Eldric dragged before the Council, his crimes exposed, the city’s civil war was halted before it could begin.

The nobles who had backed him withdrew, afraid of being tied to his treachery.

Borgrim Deepdelver, still mourning, was asked to lead the kingdom until a rightful ruler could be named.

And Thorgar?

Thorgar got his drink.

In the Goofy Goose, dwarves sang his name, ale flowed freely, and Keldric toasted to his victory.

Thorgar smiled over his tankard.

"I tell ye, if I get dragged into politics again, I'm takin' the axe to meself."

Keldric laughed. "Aye, but it was worth it, eh?"

Thorgar grinned.

"Aye. Worth it. Now, pour me another, before I start seein' straight again."

Thorgar sat in his tavern room, the warm glow of a single candle flickering over the worn pages of his journal. The smell of pipeweed and ale clung to the air, mingling with the faint scent of old parchment and ink.

He leaned back in his chair, cracked his knuckles, and dipped his quill into the inkwell.

With a grunt, he began to write.

"The mountain holds many dangers, but none so cursed as politics. I have faced beasts with fangs the size of greatswords, but none have been as venomous as a dwarf with a silver tongue and a hidden dagger."

"Eldric Frostmantle thought himself clever, playing the game of thrones with poison and bribes. But in the end, all the coin in the world couldn't save him from the weight of his own treachery. A duel in the dark, a quick axe, and the bastard now rots in a prison cell, awaiting the executioner's blade. A fitting end, though part of me wishes I'd done the job meself."

"Borgrim Deepdelver takes the throne for now. A decent enough dwarf, though grief clings to him like rust on an old blade. If he's strong enough, Durgul'Um might yet survive this mess. If not, well… someone else will sit that chair soon enough. And I hope I ain't around when that happens."

"Still, I wonder about the road ahead. There's always another job, another fool needing a blade, another legend waiting to be carved in steel and stone. But for now? Now, I drink."

Thorgar set the quill down, stretching out his aching fingers.

With a satisfied grunt, he grabbed his tankard of ale, took a long swig, and let out a contented sigh.

Then, he lit his pipe, drawing in a deep, slow breath, the familiar warmth of Redvine smoke filling his lungs.

"Aye. That's the good stuff."

For a moment, he simply sat there, enjoying the silence.

Then—a knock at the door.

The voice of Mugar, the innkeeper, rang through.

"Oi, Stonequill! I got somethin’ ye need to try. Get yer arse down to the cellar!"

Thorgar raised an eyebrow.

"If it’s another gnome invention, I swear on me beard—"

"Nay, it’s ale, ye stubborn bastard! New brew! Ain’t no one else tasted it yet! Ye get first mug!"

Thorgar grinned.

"Now ye’re talkin’."

The inn’s cellar was cool, dimly lit, and filled with the rich scent of aged barrels.

Mugar stood beside a massive wooden keg, his sleeves rolled up, his face already red from "taste-testing" his own brew.

"I call it 'The Stonebreaker.'" Mugar grinned, slapping the side of the keg. "Ye ain't tasted nothin' like this before, I promise ye that."

Thorgar raised an eyebrow. "Aye? And what's in it?"

Mugar shrugged. "A bit o’ this, a bit o’ that. Some extra hops, a splash o’ honey, and uh… well, a pinch of somethin’ special."

"Special, ye say?" Thorgar frowned. "Special like ‘best thing I ever drank,’ or special like ‘wake up naked in a stable wonderin’ what year it is?’"

Mugar grinned wider. "We’ll find out, won’t we?"

They poured two massive mugs, raised them high, and slammed them back.

The moment the ale hit Thorgar’s tongue, his eyes widened.

"By the gods! That’s—"

The rest of the sentence never came.

Because the world tilted.

And the drinking truly began.

Hours blurred into laughter, shouts, and ale flowing like a river.

Thorgar barely remembered stumbling upstairs with Mugar, their arms slung over each other's shoulders, singing some half-forgotten war song.

Then—he tripped.

Or maybe Mugar tripped.

Or maybe the whole tavern floor betrayed them both.

Either way, Thorgar crashed full-force into a table, shattering it into splinters.

Mugar, in his drunken attempt to stay upright, fell sideways—right into a seated dwarf, sending them both into a row of chairs that cracked like old bones.

For a second, there was silence.

Then, they howled with laughter.

"Ye big drunken bastard! Ye broke me table!" Mugar gasped between laughs.

"Bah! The table got in me way!" Thorgar wheezed.

A nearby dwarf raised his tankard. "To broken tables and good ale!"

The entire tavern erupted into cheers.

And then—they sang.

"Oh, roll the barrel, pour the ale,
We drink till mornin', stout and pale!
If we can't stand, we'll crawl instead,
And wake up wishin' we were dead!"

"Oh, break the chairs and smash the doors!
Fight a friend, but not the whores!
When dawnlight comes and heads are sore,
We'll do it all again once more!"

"Oh, drink ye fools, ye sons of stone!
Ale in the tankard, flesh on bone!
We'll drink till Durgul'Um's no more,
Then piss in the halls of the gods of war!"

The entire tavern roared the chorus, mugs slamming against tables, dwarves clapping in time, boots stomping against the floorboards.

Thorgar leaned against the bar, laughing so hard tears blurred his vision.

Mugar pounded his fist on the counter, gasping for breath.

"By Moradin’s beard, that`s a great song."

Thorgar grinned.

"Aye. But we’ll have to test it again tomorrow. Just to be sure."

Mugar poured them both another round.

"To tomorrow. And to more broken tables."

Thorgar raised his mug.

"Aye. And to The Stonebreaker—may it keep the healers in business."

They drank deep, and the night roared on.

The morning after the grand drinking disaster, Thorgar woke up in a pile of broken furniture, his head pounding like a dwarven forge.

Somewhere, a chair leg poked into his back. His beard was stuck to the table with dried ale.

And across from him, Mugar the innkeeper lay sprawled on the floor, snoring like a dying mule.

Thorgar grunted, peeling himself off the wreckage.

“Oi, Mugar. Wake up, ye sack of hops. If I gotta suffer this hangover, so do ye.”

Mugar groaned, rolling onto his stomach.

“Stonequill… we did somethin’ last night, didn’t we?”

Thorgar snorted.

“Aye. We broke a few tables, offended some elves, and I think that song we sang will be outlawed by the Council by noon.”

Mugar laughed weakly. Then he sat up—too fast—and immediately regretted it.

“Ugh… right. Right. But listen, lad—I got a proposition for ye.”

Thorgar rubbed his temples.

“If it involves more drinkin’, give me a few hours.”

Mugar grinned.

“Oh, it does. But first, we need to get some rare ingredients.”

Thorgar paused.

Then, he sighed.

“Aye. Of course we do.”

Mugar stood, brushing splinters off his tunic.

“The ale we drank last night? It was good—real good. But it ain’t perfect.”

Thorgar grunted.

“Aye, perfect ale don’t make a dwarf wake up feelin’ like a dead mule.”

Mugar chuckled.

“Exactly. It needs somethin’ else. Somethin’ rare. And I know just what.”

He leaned in, eyes glinting with excitement.

“Ever heard o’ Ember Hops?”

Thorgar raised an eyebrow.

“Nay. Sounds like somethin’ I’d rather smoke than drink.”

Mugar grinned.

“They’re flowers—deep orange, glow like embers, only bloom in the darkest corners of Blackroot Vale. They add a smokey-sweet kick to any brew. Ye mix ‘em right, and we’ll have the finest ale in all of Durgul’Um.”

Thorgar rolled his shoulders.

“Aye. And I suppose there’s a reason folk don’t go pickin’ ‘em all the time?”

Mugar scratched his beard.

“Well… aye. The Blackroot Vale’s cursed, ye see. Shadows move where they shouldn’t, paths twist in on themselves. And the Ember Hops? If ye don’t pluck ‘em under the full moon, they wither to dust.”

Thorgar sighed.

“Of course. Wouldn’t be worth a damn if it was easy.”

Mugar clapped him on the shoulder.

“So, what do ye say, Stonequill? One last errand before we drink ourselves into legend?”

Thorgar grinned.

“Aye, let’s go pick some damn flowers.”

That evening, Thorgar and Mugar set off toward Blackroot Vale, the haunted woods that lay beyond the city. After hours of walking they arrived at the edge of the forest.

The forest was ancient, the trees gnarled and twisted like clawing hands. Mist hung low to the ground, curling around their boots like whispering ghosts.

Mugar shuddered.

“Right. Didn’t remember the place bein’ this cheery.”

Thorgar grinned.

“Aye. Feels like home.”

They pressed forward, navigating the narrow, winding paths.

Then—the mist shifted.

And something moved in the shadows.

A low growl rumbled through the fog.

Thorgar stopped, hand on his axe.

Then, from the mist, they came.

Dark-furred wolves, their eyes glowing silver.

Their bodies flickered like smoke, half-real, half-shadow.

Mugar swallowed.

“Wolves don’t usually do that, do they?”

Thorgar grinned.

“Only the ones that wanna kill ye.”

One of the beasts lunged.

Thorgar met it mid-air, his axe swinging in a brutal arc.

The blade bit deep—but instead of blood, the creature’s body seemed to break apart into curling black mist.

“Well, that’s new.” Thorgar grunted.

The wolves circled, snapping and growling.

Mugar grabbed a burning torch from his pack.

“If yer axe don’t work, try fire!”

Thorgar grinned.

“Now ye’re speakin’ my language.”

Mugar swung the torch, the flames casting long shadows. The wolves snarled, flinching back.

Thorgar pressed forward, setting the torch to a dry branch.

Flames burst to life, illuminating the clearing.

And in the light, the wolves shrank back—then vanished into the mist.

Mugar exhaled.

"Aye, let’s remember that trick. I’d rather drink than get eaten."

Thorgar smiled. "Same, lad. Same."

Deeper in, the path began to twist unnaturally, looping back on itself.

Mugar frowned.

“Ain’t we passed this rock before?”

Thorgar narrowed his eyes.

“Aye. Somethin’ don’t want us leavin’.”

Then—Mugar screamed.

Thorgar turned—just in time to see thick, gnarled vines wrapping around Mugar’s legs, dragging him toward the forest floor.

“OI! Let go of me, ye cursed weed!” Mugar roared, kicking wildly.

Thorgar rushed forward, swinging his axe.

The blade cleaved through the vines—but instead of breaking, they tightened, yanking Mugar deeper.

The ground rumbled.

A dark shape rose from the dirt—a massive, root-covered creature, its face a twisted knot of wood, hollow sockets burning with green fire.

A Witchroot Guardian.

Thorgar grinned.

"Now that’s a fine piece o’ firewood."

The creature lashed out.

Thorgar dodged, rolling across the damp earth.

Mugar swung wildly, smashing his torch against the vines.

Fire licked across the creature’s roots, and for the first time, it recoiled, screeching.

Thorgar took the opening.

With a mighty swing, he hacked through the base of its form—

And the creature collapsed into a pile of burning bark.

Mugar gasped, scrambling free.

“That’s it. I’m drinkin’ twice as much when we get back.”

Thorgar laughed, wiping soot from his beard.

“Aye, lad. After we pick the damn flowers.”

The glow of the Ember Hops shimmered just ahead, nestled beneath the twisted roots of an ancient tree.

Thorgar sighed in relief, wiping sweat from his brow.

"There they are, Mugar. Let’s pluck these cursed things and get out of this gods-forsaken forest before it decides to eat us."

Mugar nodded, stepping forward—

"OI! KEEP YER FILTHY HANDS OFF ME HOPS!"

A deep, booming voice shattered the forest silence.

Thorgar and Mugar turned sharply.

Through the mist and tangled roots, a massive, barrel-chested dwarf stomped into the clearing. His beard was a tangled mess of gray and brown, his nose red from too many years of drinking, and his muscles looked like he could punch a table in half just to prove a point.

Behind him stood two scrawny apprentices, nervously holding empty sacks and looking like they wanted to be anywhere else.

The big dwarf jabbed a thick finger at Thorgar.

"I KNEW ye'd try to steal what's mine, ye shifty-bearded, ale-wastin', slack-jawed excuse for a brewer!"

Thorgar squinted.

"What in the name o' Moradin's hairy backside are ye talkin' about? Who in the hells are ye?"

The dwarf puffed up his chest, arms crossed.

"I AM DURGIN BLACKBREW! Finest brewer in the North! First to perfect the triple-fermented ale of Stonehearth! Master of the stout so strong it puts hair on an elf's chest! And ye, ye sorry excuse for a drinker, are trespassin' on me ingredients!"

Mugar scoffed. "Oh, piss off, Blackbrew. Yer ale's as overrated as a gnome's beard oil."

Durgin snarled, stepping closer.

"And what in all the bloody hells do ye think ye're makin', Mugar? More of that goat piss ye sell at the Goose?"

Thorgar held up a hand.

"Oi, oi. Let's focus. We got one batch o' these Ember Hops, and we got two groups of thirsty bastards. We pick 'em, split 'em, and drink 'til we forget this ever happened. Fair?"

Durgin stomped forward until he was nose-to-nose with Thorgar.

"Fair? FAIR?! I wouldn't split a pile o' dog shite with ye!"

Mugar crossed his arms. "Aye, 'cause ye'd be keepin' all the shite for yerself. Like yer ale."

Durgin growled. "Aye, at least mine don't taste like a gnome's bathwater!"

Thorgar muttered. "Why do gnomes always get dragged into this?"

Durgin ignored him. "Yer beer's weak, Mugar! I drank a whole keg once and barely pissed foam!"

Mugar's eyes bulged in fury. "At least mine don't taste like a goat pissed straight into the barrel!"

Durgin snarled. "At least mine don't smell like a troll's underpants!"

"Yer mother's a troll's underpants!"

"Yer beard's got the consistency of stale porridge!"

"Ye got arms like a halfling with rickets!"

"Ye fight like a bloody elf!"

That was it.

The fists flew.

Durgin swung first, a massive fist crashing straight into Thorgar's nose.

Thorgar stumbled back, blood already pouring, grinning through the pain.

"Aye, now we're talkin'!"

He swung back, but Durgin ducked, grabbing Thorgar by the belt and hurling him backward into a bush.

Mugar charged, fists swinging wildly. He landed a solid punch on Durgin's gut—

Which did absolutely nothing.

Durgin grinned—then grabbed Mugar by the shoulders and threw him straight onto his arse.

Mugar hit the ground hard, groaning.

"Ugh… right, remind me not to fight dwarves the size o' mountains."

Thorgar grunted, wiping blood from his nose.

"Aye, he's got fists like anvils, I'll give 'im that."

Durgin laughed, dusting off his knuckles.

"Bah! Finally, some dwarves with a bit o' fight in 'em. Ye ain't completely useless."

Thorgar spat blood onto the ground and grinned.

"Aye, well, ye punch like an orc with a broken wrist, so I ain't impressed."

Durgin barked a laugh.

"Tell ye what. We pick these Ember Hops together. Then we settle this proper—with ale."

Mugar groaned from the ground.

"Aye… fine… just give me a minute. Me ribs are reconsiderin' their placement."

With the Ember Hops gathered (after much grumbling and ale-related insults), they set their sights on the next prize:

Frozen Barley.

A legendary grain, found only in the frost-covered ruins of Karak’Zul, an abandoned dwarven stronghold deep in the Icefang Peaks.

Thorgar raised an eyebrow.

"Aye, and what lives there these days? Cause I know nothin’s ever abandoned without a reason."

Durgin grinned.

"Frost Wraiths. The spirits o’ dwarves who died refusin’ to leave their halls. Angry bastards."

Mugar groaned.

"Oh, brilliant. Ghosts. Just what I wanted."

Thorgar sighed, rubbing his temples.

"Aye. Well, guess we got no choice."

Mugar glared at him.

"We could just make normal bloody ale, ye know."

Thorgar and Durgin turned slowly toward him, horror in their eyes.

Mugar held up his hands.

"Right, right, stupid suggestion. Forget I said anythin'."

Durgin grinned.

"To Karak’Zul, then. And to the finest ale ever brewed!"

Thorgar nodded.

"And if we die, we make sure our corpses are found face-down in a barrel."

"Aye!"

The journey to Karak’Zul was a long and treacherous one.

The Icefang Peaks loomed in the distance, jagged and white, their frozen slopes glistening under the pale light of the moon.

Thorgar, wrapped in a thick cloak, trudged through the knee-high snow, grumbling.

Mugar walked beside him, shivering.

"I swear by Moradin’s hammer, if I die freezin’ me arse off just to make some fancy beer, ye best pour a keg over me grave."

Durgin Blackbrew, who somehow looked perfectly comfortable despite the cold, laughed heartily.

"Aye, don’t worry, Mugar. We’ll carve yer tombstone outta ice and write ‘Died for Ale’ on it."

Thorgar grinned through chattering teeth.

"Aye, I’ll even spill a drop in yer honor. Just one, though. Can’t be wastin’ good drink."

Mugar grumbled and pulled his cloak tighter.

Ahead, the path narrowed, leading toward a great stone bridge spanning a deep chasm.

And there, half-buried in the ice and snow, stood the ruins of Karak’Zul.

The bridge stretched across the abyss like a forgotten relic, its stone cracked and coated in thick ice.

On the other side, the gates of Karak’Zul stood tall and silent, covered in frost.

Durgin stroked his beard.

"Aye, she’s still standin’. Not bad for a hold that’s been abandoned fer centuries."

Thorgar stepped forward—and the stone beneath his boot let out a sickening crack.

He froze.

"Right. Nobody breathe. Nobody move. Nobody even think about fartin’."

Mugar gawked at the deep fissures running through the bridge.

"I don’t like this. I don’t like this at all."

Durgin snorted.

"Bah! It’s just a bit o’ bad stone. Step lightly, and we’ll be fine."

As if to prove his point, Durgin took a confident step forward.

The bridge shuddered.

Mugar swore.

Thorgar groaned.

"Ye just had to go an’ test the gods, didn’t ye?"

Then, the ice cracked beneath them.

The entire bridge groaned, shifting under their weight.

Chunks of stone broke away, tumbling into the abyss below.

Mugar yelped.

"WALK LIGHT, YE BLOODY OAFS!"

They hurried forward, boots slipping on the ice as the bridge continued to crumble behind them.

Thorgar was almost to the other side when the final section collapsed completely.

Durgin, who was in the back, let out a curse as the stone beneath him gave way.

"Oh, shite—!"

Thorgar lunged, grabbing Durgin’s outstretched hand just as he fell.

The big dwarf dangled over the abyss, kicking his legs.

"Pull me up, ye beardless bastard!"

Thorgar gritted his teeth, veins bulging as he yanked Durgin up onto solid ground.

Mugar collapsed onto his back, panting.

"Aye… right… remind me never to do that again."

Thorgar stood, dusting himself off.

"Aye. Next time, let’s take the scenic route."

Durgin laughed, slapping Thorgar’s back.

"Bah! Ye lot worry too much. Now, let’s go find our damn barley."

They turned toward the gates of Karak’Zul.

The ancient doors loomed before them, covered in layers of ice.

And as Thorgar stepped forward—

A voice whispered through the cold air.

"Turn back... trespassers..."

The temperature plummeted.

The wind whispered with voices long dead.

And from the shadows of the ruined stronghold, figures began to emerge.

The spectral forms took shape, dwarves clad in ancient armor, their faces twisted in deathly rage.

Their eyes glowed with an eerie blue light, and their weapons, though ghostly, looked sharp enough to cut through steel.

Mugar stepped back.

"Oh, bloody hells, I hate ghosts!"

Durgin gripped his warhammer.

"Bah! They're just dead dwarves! Nothin' a good swing won't fix!"

One of the Frost Wraiths stepped forward, its voice echoing through the frozen ruins.

"You have come to desecrate Karak'Zul. You shall not leave alive."

Thorgar cracked his knuckles.

"Aye? We ain't here to loot yer tombs, ye frozen bastards. We just want some barley."

The Frost Wraith raised its sword.

"Then you shall die for it."

The ghosts rushed forward, weapons raised.

Thorgar grinned, raising his axe.

"Aye, fine then. Let's dance."

The Frost Wraiths charged.

Their glowing blades hissed through the icy air, cutting through mist and shadow. Their hollow voices echoed off the frozen stone, whispering ancient curses.

Thorgar, Mugar, and Durgin stood their ground.

"Alright, lads! Let's put these frosty bastards back in their graves!" Thorgar roared, swinging his Blackroot Axe straight into the nearest wraith.

The blade sliced through the ghostly form, splitting it apart like mist caught in the wind.

For a moment, it seemed like nothing happened—

Then the wraith let out a hollow scream and dissipated into the air.

Mugar laughed nervously. "Oh, good, they ain’t completely unkillable!"

Durgin charged headfirst, swinging his warhammer wildly.

"HAH! Ye think ye can scare a Blackbrew?! I’ll smash ye into ghostly puddles!"

His hammer passed straight through one of the wraiths.

Durgin stumbled forward—right into a frozen puddle on the ground.

His foot shot out from under him.

He flailed—arms spinning wildly—

And before anyone could react, he slipped, tumbled backward, and went flying into the darkness.

"OH SHIIII—"

The sound of his scream faded.

Then—a loud crash.

Silence.

Thorgar and Mugar froze mid-swing.

The wraiths… also seemed momentarily confused.

Thorgar squinted into the darkness where Durgin had disappeared.

"Durgin? Ye still breathin’?!"

A pause.

Then, from below, a weak voice:

"…Aye."

Mugar let out a sigh of relief. "Oh, thank the gods."

Then Durgin added, "But I landed in a barrel… and I think I broke me neck."

Silence.

Mugar and Thorgar exchanged looks.

"Durgin?" Thorgar called again.

"Aye?"

"Are ye dyin'?"

"Aye."

Another pause.

Then—Durgin let out a single, wheezing laugh.

"Damn. That's a fine smellin' barrel."

And then—nothing.

Mugar's face paled.

"Oh shite. He's really dead."

Thorgar blinked.

Then sighed, rubbing his temples.

"By Moradin's hairy arse… the stubborn bastard lived through a collapsing bridge, a ghost fight, and a damn near avalanche—"

Mugar nodded.

Thorgar and Mugar fought the wraiths to death.

The halls of Karak'Zul lay silent, the only sound the whistling wind cutting through the ice-crusted ruins.

Thorgar and Mugar stepped carefully, their boots crunching over frost-covered stone. The air was thick with the weight of something old—something waiting.

"This is it… the old brewhouse," Mugar muttered, squinting through the dim blue light that filtered through cracks in the ceiling. "If the Frozen Barley still exists, it'll be in here."

Thorgar exhaled, his breath turning to mist.

"Aye. Let's grab it quick and get out before the whole mountain tries to kill us."

The Dwarven Brewing Hall stretched before them—a once-great chamber, now half-buried in frost and ruin.

Ancient copper brewing vats stood frozen in time, their sides coated in thick layers of ice. Dozens of old wooden barrels lined the walls, untouched for centuries.

And there—at the center of the room, inside a stone grain bin covered in frost—

The Frozen Barley.

It glowed faintly, the enchanted grain shimmering beneath the ice, untouched by time.

Mugar let out a low whistle.

"By Moradin's sweaty arse, it's real. And it's perfect."

Thorgar grinned.

"Aye. Let's take it and run before somethin' decides we ain't worthy."

Mugar reached forward, breaking the frost away with his gloved hands. He grabbed a handful of the golden grain and shoved it into a thick burlap sack.

The moment the barley left its resting place—

The barrels around them groaned.

A low, sickening creak echoed through the hall.

Thorgar and Mugar turned sharply.

The ancient wooden barrels, coated in frost and dust, began to tremble.

Then, with a deafening crack, seven of them split open.

From within, the dead emerged.

They were once dwarves, their bodies shriveled and blue from centuries of frostbite. Their armor was rusted, their beards long-frozen, their eyes hollow pits of burning blue.

Some still wore tattered brewmaster robes, others clutched old, ice-covered weapons.

Mugar's face went pale.

"Oh, piss in a tankard."

One of the undead dwarves tilted its head, cracking frozen bones.

Then it spoke—a voice like wind through a tomb:

"Who… dares… steal from Karak'Zul?"

Thorgar gritted his teeth, adjusting his axe.

"Not steal—borrow. We'll return it in the form o' fine ale."

The undead let out a rattling hiss.

"Only death will pay the debt."

Then they attacked.

The first corpse lunged at Thorgar, swinging a rusted axe.

Thorgar sidestepped, barely dodging the strike, then countered—his Blackroot Axe biting into frozen flesh.

The creature shrieked, but instead of falling, it grabbed Thorgar's arm with an icy grip, its fingers biting through leather and skin.

"ARGH! Bloody cold bastard!" Thorgar growled.

Mugar swung wildly with his own axe, catching one of the undead in the ribs. The creature stumbled back, but barely flinched.

"They ain't goin' down easy!" Mugar shouted.

Another undead dwarf grabbed him from behind, its jagged teeth snapping at his throat.

Mugar roared, driving his elbow backward.

The creature grunted but didn't let go.

Thorgar, still grappling with his own foe, gritted his teeth.

"OI! Hold still!"

With a mighty heave, he threw the undead off him, grabbed a rusted iron tankard from the ground, and hurled it straight at Mugar's attacker.

The tankard smashed into the undead's skull with a dull CLANG.

The creature staggered, loosening its grip.

Mugar seized the moment—he spun around and hacked through its chest, sending frozen bones clattering to the floor.

One down.

But there were still six more.

Thorgar ducked just in time as another axe swung for his head.

He rolled, came up on his feet, and drove his own axe straight into his attacker's gut.

The undead let out a ghastly moan before collapsing.

Two down.

Mugar took a hard punch to the ribs, knocking him back into a stone vat.

He gasped, coughing.

"ARGH—Thorgar! We ain’t gonna last long!"

Thorgar spat blood, dodging another attack.

"Aye! Time to get the hells outta here!"

He swung his axe one last time, cutting down another one of the creatures before grabbing Mugar by the collar.

"Run!"

Mugar didn’t need to be told twice.

They bolted for the exit, wounded and bleeding, three of the undead still chasing after them.

When they finally stumbled out of Karak’Zul, they were both bleeding, limping, and half-frozen.

The problem?

The bridge was gone.

The one they had crossed had collapsed behind them.

Mugar stared at the empty gap of ice and abyss, his breath heavy.

Thorgar exhaled, rubbing his temples.

"Aye. We ain’t climbin’ that. We need another way down."

They turned toward the ice-covered cliffs that stretched into the darkness.

There was only one path left.

Through the deep, frozen ravines.

Mugar groaned.

"Ye know what, Thorgar? Next time, we make normal damn ale."

Thorgar grinned despite his bleeding lip.

"Bah! Where’s the fun in that?"

And with that, they began the long, miserable, frozen march home.

The wind bit like knives.

The cold seeped through their armor, their bones.

The barley was safe in their packs, but their fingers were numb, their legs barely moving.

Mugar stumbled, catching himself against a frozen rock.

"If I die here, I swear to the gods, I'm hauntin' ye, Stonequill."

Thorgar snorted, teeth chattering.

"Aye, well, ye'll have to wait in line. Got plenty o' folk who want to haunt me."

Their breath grew shallow. Their vision blurred.

For a moment, Thorgar wasn't sure if they'd make it.

Then—

The faint glow of Durgul'Um's watchfires appeared in the distance.

The city.

They were almost home.

The guards gawked as two half-frozen, battered dwarves stumbled through the gates, covered in bruises and dragging sacks of barley behind them.

Mugar fell onto his knees, gasping.

Thorgar groaned, stretching his aching limbs.

"Well, lad. We made it."

Mugar, still on the ground, muttered weakly.

"Aye… but if ye tell anyone I almost died for a bag of grain, I'll kill ye meself."

Thorgar grinned.

"Bah! That's what makes it legendary."

They had done it.

Now?

It was time to brew.

The brewing hall was alive with the sounds of industry.

Massive copper kettles hissed with steam, wooden barrels lined the walls, and the thick scent of roasted malt and boiling wort filled the air.

Thorgar stood at the center of it all, arms crossed, watching as Mugar barked orders at a crew of sweating brewers.

"Oi! Careful with that! If ye spill another drop, I'll have yer beard shaved off and sold to the elves!"

A panicked apprentice scrambled to correct his mistake, quickly tightening the spigot on a massive fermentation vat.

Thorgar grinned.

"Aye, ye sound like a proper brewmaster now, Mugar. Scarin' yer workers half to death."

Mugar snorted.

"That's 'cause I am a proper brewmaster. And this, Stonequill, is goin' to be the finest ale in dwarven history."

Thorgar raised an eyebrow.

"Aye? Ye sure? Not just 'cause we nearly died for the ingredients?"

Mugar grinned.

"That just makes the story better. But trust me, lad. This ain't just ale."

He patted the side of one of the massive barrels.

"This is legend in a tankard."

The weeks passed in a blur of work. The Frozen Barley was milled carefully, the enchanted grain releasing a faint, icy mist as it was ground into fine powder. The Ember Hops were dried over low flames, their smoky aroma filling the brewhouse. The wort was boiled in massive kettles, the ingredients melded together, their magical properties bonding. The mixture was then left to ferment, sealed in barrels lined with Blackroot oak, enhancing the flavor.

Thorgar, despite being mostly a drinker, found himself watching the process with interest.

Mugar noticed and chuckled.

"Oi, Stonequill, maybe I should teach ye a thing or two. If ye ever get bored o' hackin' folk apart, ye could make a fine brewer."

Thorgar snorted.

"Aye, and what's the difference between me work and yers? Ye mix things in a pot and let 'em sit, I mix folk with the ground and let 'em rot."

Mugar laughed.

"Bah! The difference is, at least I don't get blood in me brew!"

After weeks of waiting, the ale was finally ready.

Mugar stood in front of the massive keg, tension in his face, as the first mug was poured.

The ale was a deep golden-amber, with a thin, foamy white head that clung to the rim. It smelled of smoky wood, frost-touched grain, and deep roasted malt.

Mugar took a long, slow sip.

Then—he froze.

Thorgar leaned in.

"Well? Ye dead, or is it actually good?"

Mugar slowly set the mug down.

"Thorgar… this is… this is…"

He grabbed Thorgar by the shoulders, shaking him violently.

"IT'S PERFECT!"

Thorgar laughed, pulling him off.

"Aye? So what's it called, then?"

Mugar grinned.

"The Frozen Ember."

Thorgar nodded approvingly.

"Aye. Sounds like it belongs in a bard's song. Now, let's get some folk drinkin'!"

The first night, The Goofy Goose was packed with thirsty dwarves.

Mugar stood behind the bar, pouring mug after mug, coins clinking into the till.

"Oi, Mugar! This stuff's stronger than me mother-in-law's punch!"

"Tastes like Moradin himself brewed it!"

"If I drink any more o’ this, I’ll wake up in the Halls o’ the Gods!"

The demand was immediate and overwhelming.

And the word spread fast.

Within a week, nobles started showing up.

Dwarves from House Bronzeblade, House Gemvein, and even some of the Council members pushed their way into the tavern, eager to taste the ale that had the city talking.

One noble, Lord Thormund Goldmantle, a pompous arse in fine silks, took a sip—then went wide-eyed.

"By the gods, this is better than the royal cellars! Mugar, name your price—I’ll buy a barrel for my estate!"

Mugar grinned.

"Aye, and I’ll sell ye one—for the right price. But this ain’t cheap, Lord Goldmantle. Ye want the finest, ye pay the finest."

Thorgar smiled, leaning over.

"Aye, and ye best drink it slow. This stuff ain’t for dainty nobles who sip their ale like it’s tea."

Goldmantle huffed.

"Hah! You underestimate me, Stonequill! I can drink like a proper dwarf! Watch!"

He downed an entire mug in one go.

The tavern went silent.

Then—Goldmantle stumbled.

His face went red. His knees wobbled.

He took one shaky step forward—then collapsed straight onto a table, smashing it in half.

The room erupted into cheers.

Mugar laughed so hard he had to brace himself against the bar.

"Aye! That’s how ye know it’s a proper drink!"

Thorgar grinned, lifting his own mug.

"To The Frozen Ember! And to empty pockets from all the nobles buyin’ it!"

The tavern roared their approval.

Later that night, when the madness finally calmed, Mugar sat across from Thorgar at a corner table, a huge sack of coins between them.

"Right. This is yer cut, Stonequill."

Thorgar raised an eyebrow.

"Aye? Didn’t expect ye to be sharin’ it so freely."

Mugar grinned.

"Bah, I ain't a greedy bastard—this ale wouldn't exist without ye, so it’s only fair. And besides, this is just the start. We keep this up, we’ll be richer than the damn Council."

Thorgar chuckled, sliding his tankard across the table.

"Aye, well, next time, let’s make the gold without nearly dyin’ for it, eh?"

Mugar laughed, clinking his mug against Thorgar’s.

"No promises, lad. No promises."

And with that, they drank deep, toasting to fortune, to ale, and to legend.

The Frozen Ember was no longer just an ale.

It was history in a tankard.

Change of direction

The next morning Durgul’Um burned.

The streets once filled with the sound of merchants haggling and hammers ringing against steel were now thick with the clash of axes, the cries of the wounded, and the acrid scent of smoke.

Thorgar stood at the center of the chaos, his boots splattered with mud and blood, gripping his axe as the city tore itself apart around him.

This was supposed to be a time of stability.

Borgrim Deepdelver had held the throne just long enough for the noble houses to grow impatient.

Now, Durgul’Um was a battlefield.

Market Square, Durgul’Um

Thorgar ducked just as a hammer swung over his head, shattering a wooden cart behind him.

The Bronzeblade warrior who swung it roared, going in for another strike.

Thorgar spun away, kicking the brute in the knee and bringing his axe down hard on his exposed shoulder.

The warrior screamed, dropping his weapon as he crumpled to the ground.

Mugar, panting and covered in soot, came barreling in from the side, swinging a barstool like a club.

CRACK!

A Gemvein mercenary crumpled like a sack of potatoes.

Mugar grinned.

"Hah! I tell ye, Stonequill, maybe I shoulda been a warrior instead o’ a brewer!"

Thorgar snorted, kicking aside another fallen body.

"Aye? Well, at least warriors don’t scream like a wee babe when fightin’ ghosts!"

"Oi, that was different!"

"Aye, aye, tell yerself that. Now stop jawin’ and keep fightin’!"

The clashes spread like wildfire. The Bronzeblade warriors, clad in thick armor, stormed through the streets, their axes cleaving through rival soldiers as they tried to seize the royal palace. The Gemvein mercenaries, paid in heaps of gold, slaughtered anyone in their way, seeking to carve out their own claim to the throne. Even the common folk, desperate and furious, took up arms, forming ragged militias as the city fell into utter anarchy.

In the distance, Deepdelver Keep stood surrounded, its defenders holding firm as Borgrim tried to keep what little order remained.

Thorgar gritted his teeth.

If they didn’t end this madness soon, there’d be no kingdom left to save.

Amid the carnage, Thorgar spotted a cluster of civilians huddling behind an overturned cart, trapped between warring factions.

A group of Gemvein mercenaries advanced toward them, grins splitting their scarred faces.

"Easy pickings, boys," one sneered, twirling a dagger.

Thorgar stepped in their path, rolling his shoulders.

"If ye want ‘em, ye gotta go through me first."

The mercenary chuckled, raising his blade.

"Then I guess we’re gonna—"

THWACK.

Mugar’s barstool came flying through the air, smacking the man straight in the face.

He dropped like a sack of flour.

The other mercenaries froze.

Thorgar grinned.

"Right. Who’s next?"

The mercenaries charged.

The fight was brutal—steel clashed, fists flew, and by the time the dust settled, Thorgar and Mugar stood panting over the unconscious bodies of the sellswords.

The civilians stared in shock.

An elderly dwarven woman stepped forward, grasping Thorgar’s arm.

"Bless ye, lad. Bless ye both."

Thorgar nodded.

"Aye. Now get outta here, before more o’ these bastards show up."

The civilians fled toward the safety of the Deepdelver stronghold, disappearing into the smoke.

Mugar groaned, rolling his shoulder.

"Tell me again why we ain’t just sittin’ in the tavern, drinkin’ till this all blows over?"

Thorgar grinned.

"‘Cause we’d run out o’ ale before that happens. Now c’mon, we ain’t done yet."

By the time they reached Borgrim’s stronghold, the gates were under siege.

Bronzeblade warriors hammered against the doors, while Gemvein archers rained arrows from above.

Borgrim himself stood on the walls, axe in hand, barking orders.

His eyes landed on Thorgar.

"Stonequill! Good timing, lad! I need ye inside—now!"

Thorgar nodded, then turned to Mugar.

"Ye up for one more fight, brewer?"

Mugar sighed.

"Aye, fine. But if I die, I swear to the gods I'm hauntin' yer arse."

Thorgar grinned.

"Then let's make sure ye don't."

With that, they rushed inside as the final battle for Durgul'Um truly began.

The Sacred Hall of Kings stood deep within the heart of Durgul'Um, its ancient stone walls etched with the names of every ruler to ever sit upon the throne.

It was meant to be a place of wisdom, of peace.

Tonight, it was a slaughterhouse.

Thorgar and Mugar burst through the heavy doors, the echoes of battle still ringing in their ears.

Inside, council members lay slumped over their stone seats, blood pooling on the floor. Some were already dead. Others clutched at their wounds, gasping for air.

And standing among the bodies, cloaked in shadows and steel, were the assassins.

The Bladeborn.

Their faces hidden behind iron masks, their movements precise and deadly.

One turned toward Thorgar, flipping a thin, curved dagger in his gloved hand.

The blade gleamed with a sickly green hue.

Poison.

Mugar swallowed hard.

"Thorgar. I think we just walked into somethin’ worse than a bar tab we can’t pay."

The lead assassin tilted his head.

"Kill them."

The assassins moved fast—too fast.

The first lunged for Thorgar’s throat, blade flashing.

Thorgar barely managed to parry the strike, twisting his axe to catch the assassin’s wrist.

Mugar, meanwhile, had no such grace.

The second assassin dashed toward him, silent as death, dagger raised—

Mugar, panicking, grabbed the nearest thing he could find.

A Council Elder’s ceremonial goblet.

With a desperate yell, he threw it straight into the assassin’s masked face.

CLANG!

The assassin stumbled, stunned.

Mugar gawked.

"Hah! That worked?!"

The moment of victory lasted exactly two seconds before another assassin tackled him to the ground.

The hall’s torches flickered, the light casting long, jagged shadows over the battlefield.

Thorgar traded blow after blow with his masked attacker, but the assassin was too quick—

Until Thorgar faked a swing, then smashed his forehead straight into the bastard’s face.

The assassin stumbled back, dazed.

Thorgar grinned, wiping the blood from his forehead.

"Aye, masks don’t help much when ye’re gettin’ headbutted, do they?"

He followed through with a brutal axe swing, cutting the assassin down.

Mugar, meanwhile, had managed to roll his attacker off him, scrambling to his feet.

An assassin came at him again—

But this time, Mugar was ready.

He sidestepped, grabbed a fallen elder’s ceremonial staff, and swung it like a club.

CRACK!

The assassin crumpled.

Mugar panted.

"Ye sneaky bastards fight like elves, I swear!"

Just as they thought they were gaining ground—

A group of royal guards stormed into the hall, weapons drawn.

For a brief moment, relief washed over Thorgar.

Then—one of the guards impaled a wounded council member through the chest.

Thorgar froze.

Mugar stared in horror.

"They’re in on it?!"

The guards turned to them, empty-eyed and silent.

Poisoned.

Not just bribed—enchanted.

The same venom dripping from the assassins’ daggers had corrupted their minds.

Thorgar cursed under his breath.

"Right. That’s just bloody fantastic."

The guards rushed forward.

Thorgar gritted his teeth.

"Ye ever wanted to punch a royal guard in the face, Mugar?"

Mugar grinned.

"Aye. But I never thought I’d live to tell about it."

"Well, now’s yer chance!"

The battle was brutal.

By the time the last assassin lay dead on the hall floor, Thorgar and Mugar were both bleeding, panting, barely standing.

The few remaining council members trembled behind the throne, too afraid to speak.

But one—an old, frail dwarf covered in blood, barely clinging to life— lifted his trembling hand.

Thorgar rushed to his side, kneeling.

"Hold on, old one. Don't ye die just yet."

The elder coughed, blood trickling from his lips.

"It… it was never about… the throne…"

Thorgar frowned.

"What? What do ye mean?"

The elder clutched Thorgar's tunic, pulling him close.

"The heir… the true heir… is not in the noble houses."

Mugar blinked.

"What?!"

The elder's breath shuddered.

"You… must find… the Shattered Crown… only it… will reveal…"

He exhaled sharply.

And then—he was gone.

Thorgar stared down at him, mind racing.

The heir wasn't in the noble houses?

Then who the hell was meant to rule Durgul'Um?

Mugar shifted uncomfortably.

"Aye, uh… Thorgar?"

Thorgar snapped out of his thoughts.

"What?"

Mugar pointed toward the door.

Where the sound of heavy boots echoed.

Reinforcements.

"Might be time to leave, lad."

Thorgar stood, wiping blood from his axe.

"Aye. But we’re not done."

He looked one last time at the fallen elder, then turned toward the exit.

"Not by a long damn shot."

Durgul’Um had become a nightmare.

The once-great city of the dwarves, carved into the mountain over thousands of years, was now a battlefield of fire, steel, and death.

Where once the forges rang with the sound of hammer on anvil, now screams echoed through the stone halls.

Where once taverns overflowed with laughter and song, now they burned—charred ruins filled with the stench of cooked flesh.

The war for the throne had become a war against the city itself.

No one was safe.

The Lower Districts, home to the common folk, were now little more than slaughterhouses.

Desperate civilians had barricaded themselves inside their homes, trying to keep the war outside their doors.

But the war didn’t care.

A group of Bronzeblade warriors, their armor spattered with blood, stormed into a residential alley, axes in hand.

A dwarven father, armed with nothing but a broken shovel, stood before his wife and children, trembling but determined.

"Please! We ain't part o' this! We just want to live!"

The Bronzeblade captain sneered, raising his axe.

"Then ye should’ve left the city."

The axe fell.

The mother screamed.

Blood spattered the stone walls.

The children cried out—until another axe silenced them.

The warriors moved on, leaving the bodies behind.

Not an ounce of mercy.

This was a war to the bitter end.

The Gemveins, greedy and opportunistic, had turned the Upper City into a battlefield of flame.

Their mercenaries lit torches and hurled them into the grand estates, setting fire to the halls where gold had once been counted, where contracts had been signed with smiles and handshakes.

Now, the only contracts being written were in blood.

A noblewoman in fine silks ran screaming through the streets, her clothes ablaze, her hair melting into her scalp.

Behind her, Gemvein mercenaries laughed, watching her burn.

One, a scarred human in chainmail, took a sip from a stolen silver goblet.

"Aye, ain’t she a pretty sight? Nothin’ like a noble roastin’ alive to warm the heart."

His comrade chuckled, kicking over a barrel of oil and sending more flames crawling up the walls.

"Think we’ll get a bonus fer takin’ the Upper City, or just first pick o’ the loot?"

The scarred mercenary grinned.

"Both, if we’re lucky. Either way, we’re rich men by the time this is over."

The estate behind them collapsed, the screams within dying into nothing.

"Come on, boys! More houses to burn!"

And they marched on.

Even among once-loyal brothers, the war sowed betrayal.

The Smiths' Guild and the Stonemasons, once neutral in the fight, had been dragged in.

But not by choice.

It had started as a simple dispute—a group of Bronzeblade supporters demanded that the guilds forge weapons for their war effort.

The Smiths refused.

"We make tools, not weapons for a butcher's war!"

The Bronzeblade warrior leading the demand smiled.

"Aye? Then ye don't need yer hands, do ye?"

And so the slaughter began.

The forges, once the heart of industry, became pyres.

Smiths were thrown into their own furnaces, their dying screams mixing with the roar of the flames.

Their apprentices tried to flee, but the warriors chased them down, hacking them apart with crude laughter.

By morning, the Forge District was painted red.

The streets ran with molten metal and dwarven blood.

And the hammers of Durgul'Um—which had once built wonders—fell silent.

While the streets raged with open war, the shadows held their own kind of death.

The noble houses, unable to claim victory through battle, turned to knives in the dark.

At the Gemvein estate, a drunken lord slumped in his chair, laughing as he counted his growing pile of gold.

He had backed too many sides in the war—thinking his coin would keep him safe.

But gold couldn't stop the assassin waiting in the rafters.

A figure in black dropped silently behind him, blade flashing.

The lord didn't even have time to scream.

His gold coins spilled from his hand, clinking onto the floor, rolling in his blood.

Not far away, another noblewoman woke to find her guards lying in pools of crimson, their throats cut.

She tried to run—

But a hand wrapped around her mouth.

A whisper in her ear:

"The game’s over, my lady. Sleep now."

A dagger slid into her ribs. And she did not wake again.

Not even the young were spared.

In the ruins of the marketplace, a mother dragged her two children through the rubble, her breath ragged.

She knew she couldn’t outrun them. She knew the mercenaries would find them. So she did the only thing she could. She shoved her children into a broken barrel, whispering.

"Don’t make a sound. Don’t come out. Not until it’s safe."

The children shook, wide-eyed, nodding.

The mother turned to face the mercenaries, standing tall.

"Please—"

A sword punched through her stomach.

She gasped, staggered—then collapsed.

The mercenaries stepped over her cooling corpse, looting her pockets, laughing.

One glanced at the barrel.

"Ye hear somethin’?"

The other mercenary scoffed.

"Bah, just the wind. Keep movin’."

They left. The children did not cry. They did not move. And they did not come out. Not until it was safe.

The war raged through the night. By dawn, the city was barely standing. The streets were clogged with corpses. The air was thick with smoke.

What was once the greatest dwarven kingdom in the realm was now a battlefield of ruins and ghosts.

And still—the true heir had not been found. And if they didn't find them soon… There wouldn't be a throne left to take.

The Royal Catacombs lay deep beneath Durgul'Um, hidden behind layers of stone that had not been touched in centuries.

By the time Thorgar and Mugar reached the entrance, the war above had become a distant roar—a muffled thunder of clashing steel, burning wood, and dying screams.

They stood before a massive stone doorway, carved with runes older than the city itself. The symbol of the First King, a crown split down the middle—The Shattered Crown.

Mugar, panting from their desperate escape through the ruins, wiped sweat and blood from his forehead.

"Right. I'm gonna go ahead and assume this ain't gonna be as easy as just knockin' on the door?"

Thorgar ran a hand over the ancient runes, frowning.

"Aye… if the legends are true, then no bastard's walked these halls in centuries. And the ones that did? They never came back."

Mugar groaned.

"Brilliant. Ye always take me on the best bloody adventures, Stonequill."

Thorgar grinned.

"Aye. Now shut up and help me push this damn door open."

With a mighty heave, they shoved against the stone, the dust of ages spilling into the air as the door groaned open.

The path beyond was black as a forgotten grave.

And it was waiting.

The tunnels stretched before them, a maze of forgotten crypts and dust-covered statues of kings long dead.

Their footsteps echoed, the silence between them heavier than the stone above.

Then—a voice.

Faint, distant.

A whisper that slithered through the dark like a cold wind.

"Turn back."

Mugar froze.

"Aye, did ye just—"

Thorgar raised his axe.

"Aye. We ain’t alone down here."

Then the first blade came screaming from the shadows.

From behind the ancient pillars, Bronzeblade warriors burst forth, their armor gleaming in the dim torchlight.

Their leader, a hulking brute of a dwarf with a jagged scar across his cheek, sneered.

"Yer too late, Stonequill! The throne belongs to the strong, not dusty old runes!"

Thorgar grinned, rolling his shoulders.

"Aye? Then come prove it, ye miserable bastard."

The fight exploded into chaos.

Thorgar clashed against the Bronzeblade captain, their axes ringing like the forges of war.

Mugar, forced into battle once again, grabbed an old funerary urn and smashed it over another warrior’s head.

"Sorry, whoever’s ashes those were!" he wheezed, dodging a wild sword swing.

Thorgar, blocking a brutal strike, kicked his attacker square in the gut, sending the warrior crashing into an ancient sarcophagus.

"Ye Bronzeblades never did like history, did ye?"

"History’s for the weak! The strong make their own!" the captain snarled.

"Aye? Let’s see how much history ye make with a broken jaw."

Thorgar swung hard—his axe connecting with the captain’s face.

Teeth flew.

The Bronzeblade staggered, gargling blood—before Thorgar finished him with a brutal hack to the chest.

The remaining warriors hesitated.

Then they ran.

Mugar spat on the floor.

"Cowards."

Thorgar wiped his blade.

"Let ‘em run. We got bigger problems."

Because beyond the battle, at the edge of the flickering torchlight, a second group of figures was moving.

Unlike the Bronzeblades, the Gemveins weren’t here to fight.

They were here to destroy.

Thorgar’s sharp eyes caught a figure kneeling before the runic walls, pressing a vial of strange liquid against the stone.

His blood ran cold.

"OI! STOP!"

The Gemvein saboteur smiled and hurled the vial—

And the wall exploded.

The entire tomb shook.

Cracks splintered through the floor.

Dust and rubble rained down from above.

Mugar stumbled, cursing.

"They’re tryin’ to bring the whole damn place down!"

Thorgar rushed forward, burying his axe into the nearest saboteur’s back before he could throw another vial.

The rest of the Gemveins scattered, retreating into the shadows.

But the damage was already done.

The walls groaned, ancient mechanisms grinding to life.

And then—they awoke.

From the cracked walls, the statues of the First King’s honor guard began to move.

Stone ground against stone as they rose, their massive carved weapons gleaming with magical energy.

Eyes lit with pale blue fire, they turned toward Thorgar and Mugar.

And in unison, their voices rumbled through the tomb.

"ONLY THE WORTHY MAY PASS."

Mugar, still gasping for breath, groaned.

"Oh, come on! Can we not get a bloody break?!"

The first guardian swung.

Thorgar barely dodged, rolling as a massive stone axe cleaved into the floor where he had just stood.

"We ain't fightin' these things! RUN!"

Mugar didn't need to be told twice.

They sprinted down the crumbling halls, the tomb collapsing around them, the stone guardians marching relentlessly behind.

At last, they burst into a final chamber, the walls covered in golden dwarven runes—the true lineage of the First King, unbroken through time.

And there, in the center, upon a pedestal of obsidian stone—

The Shattered Crown.

The symbol of the First King, cracked yet unbroken, radiating power.

Mugar, gasping, bent over his knees.

"We… made it…"

Thorgar stepped forward, eyes scanning the ancient runes.

And there—etched into the stone, the words they had been searching for:

"The Heir to the Throne of Durgul'Um… lies not in blood, but in oath."

Thorgar stared, breathless.

The rightful ruler was not of noble blood.

The heir was someone chosen by the mountain itself.

Someone who had upheld the ancient dwarven oaths when all others had failed.

Someone who had fought, bled, and nearly died for the survival of the kingdom.

Mugar’s eyes slowly widened as he followed Thorgar’s gaze.

And then—he started laughing.

A deep, exhausted, stunned laugh.

"Oh, ye gotta be shittin’ me."

Because the final line of the inscription read:

"Let the one who has kept the mountain’s honor… bear its crown."

For a long moment, Thorgar just stared at the inscription.

The words felt heavy, older than the stone they were carved into.

Mugar, still catching his breath, slapped his shoulder.

"Well, Stonequill? Ye gonna put on the crown or just gawk at it?"

Thorgar exhaled slowly, rubbing his beard.

"Aye, no. No bloody way."

Mugar blinked.

"What? What d’ye mean no? It’s right there! The mountain itself says it! Ye held yer oaths, ye fought for the city, ye ain’t been bribed, murdered, or set fire to anyone ye weren’t supposed to—"

Thorgar shook his head.

"Aye, but listen to the rest. ‘Generations of oath-keeping.’ That ain't me. I ain't got a name carved into the stones of this city. I'm just a traveler who drinks too much and stumbles into trouble."

Mugar paused.

"Huh. I mean, aye. Fair point."

Thorgar turned back to the inscription, running his hand over the ancient runes.

"It ain't about fightin'. Or winnin'. It's about someone whose whole clan has lived by the mountain’s law. Someone who’s been part of Durgul’Um’s heart long before this war started."

Then his eyes hardened.

"I think I know who."

The Stoneguard Clan had never sought power.

For centuries, they had stood as keepers of Durgul'Um's traditions—protectors of the ancient halls, guardians of the oaths that bound the city together.

Their leader, Haldir Stoneguard, had never wavered in his duty.

While others played politics, he had held the city's defenses.

When the war started, he had stood firm at Deepdelver Keep, refusing to side with any noble house, believing Durgul'Um belonged to all dwarves.

Thorgar had fought beside him.

And if there was anyone worthy of the throne, it was him.

They rushed back through the collapsing catacombs, dodging falling debris, leaping over crumbling bridges, and outrunning the relentless march of the stone guardians.

By the time they emerged into the ruined city, the war was at its breaking point.

The Bronzeblades and Gemveins were pushing toward the palace, their forces battering down the gates, the last defenders barely holding the line.

Civilians cowered in the ruins, too weak or too broken to flee.

Above them all, Borgrim Deepdelver stood upon the last standing wall, his axe heavy in his hand, knowing he couldn't hold out much longer.

Then—Thorgar roared.

"HALT!"

His voice echoed across the battlefield.

For a moment, everything stopped.

From the ruined streets, from the burning towers, from the blood-streaked alleys—all eyes turned to him.

And Thorgar held the Shattered Crown high.

Silence fell over the war-torn city.

Thorgar's voice rang clear.

"Ye fight over the throne, but the mountain has already spoken! The rightful king ain't Bronzeblade, nor Gemvein, nor Deepdelver!"

He turned toward the remaining defenders, toward Haldir Stoneguard, who stood among them, battered but unbroken.

"The heir of Durgul'Um is the one who kept its honor. The one whose family has never wavered, whose ancestors kept the oaths this city was built on."

Thorgar locked eyes with Haldir.

"Haldir Stoneguard. Ye are the king this mountain chose."

A murmur rippled through the gathered warriors.

The Bronzeblades and Gemveins, stunned, exchanged glances.

Borgrim, still standing on the ruined wall, let out a heavy breath.

"By Moradin's hammer… it makes sense."

Haldir, caught completely off-guard, took a slow step forward.

"I—I never sought the throne."

Thorgar grinned.

"Aye. And that's exactly why ye deserve it."

The war did not end with cheers.

It ended with exhaustion, with disbelief, with warriors too tired to lift their blades anymore.

The Bronzeblades, realizing they had lost, lowered their weapons.

The Gemveins, seeing no more profit in bloodshed, withdrew their mercenaries.

And before the ruined gates of Durgul'Um, Haldir Stoneguard knelt before the Shattered Crown.

He ran a calloused hand over the broken metal, feeling the weight of generations.

Then—he rose, placing it upon his brow.

The new King of Durgul'Um had been crowned.

The war was over.

But the smell of blood, smoke, and broken stone still clung to the air.

Durgul'Um had survived—but barely.

The new king, Haldir Stoneguard, wasted no time. With the noble houses defeated and the city in ruins, there was no celebration—only the long, hard work of rebuilding.

Every day, the sound of hammers on stone replaced the clash of swords.

The dead were gathered, honored with proper rites, their names etched into the walls of the Hall of Remembrance.

The city's defenses were repaired, the ruined forges relit, and slowly, life returned.

But not all wounds could be mended with mortar and sweat.

The Bronzeblades and Gemveins, broken but not gone, still whispered in dark corners. Some refused to accept Haldir's rule, believing the throne should belong to a bloodline, not an oath.

Thorgar kept his axe sharp. He knew this peace might not last forever.

As the days turned to weeks, Thorgar and Mugar found themselves drinking in The Goofy Goose, watching the city rise from the ashes.

"So, what now?" Mugar asked, knocking back a deep gulp of ale. "We've fought a war, found a king, nearly died half a dozen times—what's next, eh? We gonna just retire and take up knitting?"

Thorgar snorted.

"I don't think I've ever sat still for more than a week, Mugar. Doubt I'll start now."

Mugar leaned in, eyes gleaming.

"Then I got an idea. A business venture."

Thorgar raised an eyebrow.

"Oh? What kind?"

Mugar slammed a fist on the table.

"A grand brewery! The biggest in Durgul'Um! The Stonequill Brewery! We'll make The Frozen Ember on a scale fit for kings!"

Thorgar chuckled.

"Ambitious. Ye sure the city wants to drink instead of recover?"

Mugar grinned.

"Aye, Stonequill, that's the best time for drinkin'. When folk are pickin' up the pieces, they need ale more than ever. To remember the fallen. To ease the pain. To move forward."

Thorgar thought for a moment. Then he grinned.

"Aye. That’s not a bad idea."

Mugar raised his mug.

"To profit, then!"

Thorgar clinked mugs with him.

"To ale!"

They drank deep.

The Brewery

For the first time in a long while, Thorgar Stonequill wasn't swinging his axe in battle.

He was swinging a hammer instead.

The new brewery—The Frozen Ember—rose steadily in the heart of Durgul'Um, built upon a strong stone foundation, reinforced with the finest timber from the Blackroot Hollow.

Mugar had insisted on quality, dragging Thorgar through endless meetings with stonemasons, woodworkers, and even glassblowers to ensure everything was built to last.

"I ain’t havin’ some half-baked ale hall fall apart after one good brawl, Stonequill! This place needs to endure! Like a proper dwarven temple!"

Thorgar, covered in sawdust and bruises from carrying barrels, had just grunted.

"Aye, a temple… to ale. I can live with that."

By the time three months had passed, the brewery stood tall, its stone walls sturdy, its great iron kettles gleaming in the lamplight.

A massive wooden sign, carved and painted by the city's finest craftsmen, hung above the entrance: "The Frozen Ember."

Finally, it was time to brew.

Mugar’s two sisters, Elaira and Ilis, arrived the same day the final brick was placed.

They were as fiery as their brother—one with arms as strong as a smith, the other with a mind sharp as a whetstone.

Elaira, rolling up her sleeves, grinned as she inspected the brewing kettles.

"So, Mugar, ye build a brewery, but do ye even remember how to make a proper brew? Or are we here to save yer sorry arse?"

Mugar snorted.

"Oi! I can brew just fine! But if ye two want to help, I ain't complainin'."

Ilis, the quieter of the two, smiled as she flipped through an old brewing ledger.

"Good. 'Cause I've been workin' on a recipe that'll make every dwarf in this city weep with joy."

The operation began. The finest dark malt was crushed and milled, filling the brewery with a rich, earthy scent. The barley, harvested from the highlands, was roasted to perfection over an open flame. The Ember Hops, still glowing faintly with their mystical warmth, were carefully added to the mix.

The great kettles bubbled and steamed as the mixture boiled, dark as the mines beneath the city, thick with promise.

Mugar, stirring the massive vat, beamed.

"Ahhh… listen to that. That's the sound of liquid gold, Thorgar."

Thorgar, watching with his arms crossed, smiled.

"Sounds like ye finally found somethin' yer good at."

Elaira, wiping sweat from her brow, chuckled.

"Aye, and for once, it ain't startin' bar fights."

Mugar pointed a wooden ladle at her.

"Oi! That's a vital part o' the business too!"

For weeks, the brew sat in great barrels, fermenting deep in the stone cellars beneath the brewery.

Each day, they checked on it, watching the dark liquid transform, rich with roasted barley and the slightest hint of magic from the Ember Hops.

Then—finally—the day came.

The first keg of The Frozen Ember Dark Ale was tapped.

Mugar filled four mugs, passing them around.

The dwarves raised their drinks.

Mugar grinned.

"Here’s to the hardest work we’ve ever done. And to the drink that’ll make it all worth it."

They clinked mugs—and took their first sip.

The room went silent.

Then Thorgar set his mug down with a deep exhale.

"By the gods. That’s… that’s the best bloody ale I’ve ever had."

Elaira laughed.

"Told ye we had talent."

Ilis smiled.

"This is gonna make us rich."

Mugar, blinking away the start of happy tears, nodded.

"Aye. We did it."

And then—it was time to celebrate.

The Frozen Ember opened its doors that evening, and the tavern erupted into life. Dwarves poured in from every part of the city, eager to taste the first brew of a new legend. Old warriors, young craftsmen, merchants, and miners—every kind of dwarf filled the hall. Even a few elves and humans, curious and bold enough, came to see what all the fuss was about.

Mugar stood atop a table, raising his arms.

"Lads! Lasses! Welcome to The Frozen Ember! The finest brew ye’ll ever taste is now flowin’ freely, so raise yer mugs and drink like there’s no tomorrow!"

The crowd roared, mugs slammed together, and ale flowed like a golden river.

Thorgar, seated at the bar, grinned as he watched the chaos unfold.

A group of dwarves had already started a drinking contest.

A bard strummed a lute in the corner, singing a ballad about how Thorgar had single-handedly punched a dragon.

(Thorgar didn’t bother correcting him. It made for a better story that way.)

Elaira and Ilis moved through the crowd, refilling mugs, laughing and keeping the business running.

Mugar, already three ales in, slapped Thorgar on the back.

"Oi! Let’s get a proper song goin’!"

Thorgar, chuckling, stood up on a chair and bellowed out a tune.

"Raise yer mugs, ye sons o’ stone!"
"Drink deep, drink long, ‘til the barrels groan!"
"From the forge to the hall, let the ale run free,"
"For a dwarf without drink ain’t a dwarf to me!"

The whole tavern erupted, pounding their mugs against the tables, stomping their boots to the rhythm.

The night stretched on, filled with laughter, drunken arm wrestling, wild dancing, and more ale than anyone could count.

The Frozen Ember had begun.

And Thorgar knew, deep in his bones, that this was just the beginning of something great.

Mugar, half-drunk, grinned at him.

"We finally did it, Stonequill. We finally built somethin’ worth rememberin’."

Thorgar raised his mug.

"Aye, Mugar. That we did."

They drank deep—and the tavern roared with song once more.

The Frozen Ember was alive with laughter, song, and the steady roar of ale being poured into waiting mugs.

The grand opening had been a massive success.

Thorgar and Mugar had barely sat down to enjoy their own drinks before the tavern had swelled with more dwarves than it had seats.

But as the night wore on, a new tension began to settle into the air.

At first, it was just heated words, a few gritted teeth and sharp glances.

Then—the first mug was thrown.

It smashed against the far wall, spilling ale all over an unsuspecting gnome, who squeaked in terror and dove under a table.

Thorgar set down his drink.

Mugar rubbed his temples.

Elaira and Ilis froze behind the bar.

The entire tavern was divided into two sides—Bronzeblades on one, Deepdelvers on the other.

Their old grudges had followed them—and now, The Frozen Ember was about to become a battlefield.

One Bronzeblade, a hulking warrior with a scar down his face, slammed his mug onto the table.

"Oi! Deepdelver! I bet ye ain't got the spine to say that again!"

The Deepdelver across from him, a thick-bearded dwarf with gold rings in his braids, sneered.

"I said yer lot ain't got the brains to know a proper ale from a puddle o' goblin piss!"

The tavern erupted into gasps.

Mugar's eye twitched.

"Oi! Don't insult the ale, ye bastards!"

The Deepdelver ignored him, standing up and shoving the Bronzeblade.

The Bronzeblade shoved back.

Someone tripped over a barstool.

Someone accidentally elbowed an orc in the face.

And suddenly—the entire room was on the brink of chaos.

Thorgar knew he had seconds to act before fists started flying.

And there were three ways this could go.

Thorgar raised his voice over the growing commotion.

"OI! If ye bastards wanna prove who's the better clan, then ye'll do it the proper dwarven way—THROUGH ALE!"

Every head in the room turned to him.

He slammed his mug down.

"I challenge the toughest Bronzeblade and the strongest Deepdelver to out-drink ME! Winner gets the braggin' rights, loser pays the damn tab!"

A hush fell over the tavern.

Then the Bronzeblade warrior grinned.

"Aye… ye think ye can drink ME under the table, Stonequill?! I accept!"

The Deepdelver leader laughed.

"And I'll outlast ye both! Let's drink!"

Mugar sprinted to the bar.

"Elaira! Ilis! Get the strongest barrels we got! We're settlin' this dispute the old-fashioned way!"

And so—the drinking contest began.

The Frozen Ember was packed wall to wall, the tension thick as a barrel of over-fermented stout.

On one side of the long table stood Gorgrim Bronzeblade, a towering brute of a dwarf with arms thick as kegs and a beard braided so tight it looked ready to snap.

On the other side, Dulgrin Deepdelver, a stocky, barrel-chested warrior with gold rings in his beard and a nose crooked from one too many headbutts.

And between them—Thorgar Stonequill, grinning like a fool.

Mugar stood on a chair, waving his arms for silence.

"LADS AND LASSES! YE STAND WITNESS TO THE FIRST GREAT CHALLENGE OF THE FROZEN EMBER!"

A roar of cheers and stomping boots shook the tavern.

Mugar pointed at the three warriors.

"HERE'S HOW THIS GOES!"

"First to drop loses. Last dwarf standin' pays nothin'! Losers pay double! AND NO ONE SPILLS A DAMN DROP!"

The crowd erupted again.

Thorgar cracked his knuckles, looking between his two opponents.

"Aye, this oughta be fun."

Gorgrim snorted, arms crossed.

"Hope ye got a strong stomach, Stonequill. Ye’re sittin’ with the best drinker in all the Bronzeblades."

Dulgrin leaned forward, grinning.

"Funny. I was just about to say the same thing about me."

Mugar slammed a full mug in front of each of them.

"DRINK!"

The first mugs were downed with ease.

Thorgar let out a satisfied sigh, setting his mug down with a thunk.

Gorgrim barely blinked, licking the foam from his beard.

Dulgrin burped loud enough to shake the rafters.

The crowd cheered.

"Another!"

Mugar filled them up again.

"Ye’re all sober as elves! Pick up the pace!"

By the fifth round, things started to change. Thorgar was grinning, his face a little red, but his eyes sharp. Gorgrim was still drinking steady, but his beard was starting to look a little... lopsided. Dulgrin had started talking to his mug like it was a long-lost brother.

Mugar grinned, refilling the mugs.

"Alright, ye sods! Time to separate the warriors from the whelps!"

Thorgar knocked back his ale with a grin.

"Ahhh. This is goin’ down smoother than a stolen coin purse."

Gorgrim snorted.

"Bah! I ain’t even feelin’ it yet!"

Dulgrin poked his mug.

"Aye… but do ye think the ale feels *us*?"

Silence.

Thorgar and Gorgrim stared at him.

Mugar leaned in.

"Lad, are ye talkin’ to yer drink?"

Dulgrin blinked.

"...No."

Thorgar smiled.

"Might be losin’ him, Mugar."

By the ninth round, the contest had become legendary. Thorgar was still drinking, though his grin was starting to look a little too permanent. Gorgrim’s beard was now completely undone, hanging limp like a wet rope. Dulgrin was swaying, muttering about how the walls were moving.

Mugar slammed down three more mugs.

"FINAL ROUND! DRINK, YE BASTARDS!"

Thorgar, Gorgrim, and Dulgrin lifted their mugs.

Dulgrin tilted his head.

"Oi… why’s my mug floatin’?"

Then he fell sideways off his chair.

BAM!

Mugar pointed.

"DOWN GOES DEEPDELVER!"

The crowd roared. Thorgar and Gorgrim locked eyes. They both drank at the same time. Thorgar slammed his mug down. Gorgrim swallowed his last gulp… Then paused.

His eyes crossed slightly. Then—he slid face-first into the table. THUMP. Mugar threw his arms up.

"AND THE WINNER IS THORGAR STONEQUILL!"

The tavern exploded into cheers, mugs raised in salute.

Thorgar grinned, leaning on the table.

"Aye… never doubted it fer a second."

Then he swayed slightly.

"Might need a minute, though."

With the drinking contest settled, a group of dwarves had already set up an axe-throwing target at the far end of the tavern.

Thorgar, still a little tipsy, cracked his knuckles.

"Alright. Who's next?"

A grizzled old dwarf, One-Eyed Fargus, stepped forward.

"I once hit a target dead-center from fifty paces while blindfolded! Let's see if ye can match it!"

Mugar, now acting as referee, nodded.

"Aye! Rules are simple! Best o' three shots!"

Fargus threw first.

THUNK!

A solid hit—right near the center of the target.

The crowd cheered.

Thorgar grinned.

"Aye, not bad for someone who can't see."

Fargus huffed.

"Let's see if yer better, then!"

Thorgar took his stance. He spun his axe once in his hand. Breathed in. And threw.

THUNK!

The axe buried itself dead-center, splitting Fargus's into two. The tavern went silent for half a second. Then—cheers and stomping boots. Fargus stared at the ruined target, then at Thorgar.

"Well. Bugger me sideways."

Mugar slapped Thorgar on the back.

"Aye, Stonequill. Ye may not be king, but by the gods, ye own this tavern tonight!"

And with that—the night rolled on with more drinking, more laughter, and more ridiculous contests.

For once, no one was fighting. No one was dying. Just good ale, good friends, and the greatest night The Frozen Ember had ever seen.

The soft glow of candlelight flickered in the upstairs room of The Frozen Ember, casting long shadows across the stone walls.

Thorgar sat at his wooden writing desk, a half-eaten steak resting on a plate beside him, its juices soaking into the grain of the table. A mug of ale sat nearby, untouched for the moment, and from the corner of his mouth, a thick curl of dark gray smoke rose from his pipe, twisting lazily toward the ceiling.

He exhaled slowly, letting the silence settle in, then dipped his quill into the inkwell and began to write in his well-worn leather journal.

"The war is done, the city still stands, and somehow, against all odds, I've found meself ownin' a tavern. If ye had told me a year ago that I'd be brewin' ale instead o' swingin' axes, I'd have laughed ye out of the room. But here we are. The Frozen Ember thrives, and I have to admit, there's somethin' satisfying about buildin' somethin' that doesn't involve killin' fer once."

"Tonight was another fine night. Drank the Bronzeblades and Deepdelvers under the table, settled a feud without spillin' too much blood, and proved I can still throw an axe better than half the warriors in this damned city. Mugar's happy, the ale's flowin', and the people keep comin'. Maybe, just maybe, we've built somethin' worth rememberin'."

"Then again, I don't trust peace. Ain't in me nature."

"Somethin's always stirrin'. Ye can feel it in the bones of the city. A storm brewin'. But that's a problem for tomorrow. Tonight, I drink, I write, and I enjoy the quiet while it lasts."

Thorgar set the quill down, taking a long drag from his pipe, watching the smoke swirl in the dim light.

Then—a soft knock at the door.

He smiled.

"Come in."

The door creaked open, and Ilis stepped inside, carrying a fresh mug of ale in one hand.

She leaned against the doorframe, her sharp green eyes glinting in the candlelight, a playful smile tugging at the corner of her lips.

"Look at ye, Stonequill. All broody with yer books. Didn't take ye fer a poet."

Thorgar chuckled, taking the mug from her hand.

"Aye, well. Gotta put me thoughts somewhere, or else I might go mad."

Ilis cocked her head, stepping closer.

"Maybe ye already are. Tied yerself to a tavern, takin' in all the troublemakers o' Durgul'Um. Livin' up here like some grizzled old hermit. Ye sure ye don't miss the road?"

Thorgar took a long drink, then wiped his mouth.

"Maybe. But for now, the ale's good, the company's better, and I get to spend me nights watchin' a fine lass bring me drinks. Could be worse."

Ilis laughed, rolling her eyes.

"Flatterer. I should charge ye double."

Thorgar grinned—and as she turned to leave, he reached out and slapped her ass.

She yelped, spinning on her heel, but her smile only widened.

"Oi! That'll cost ye extra next time, ye cheeky bastard."

Then—she was gone, leaving the scent of ale and mischief in her wake.

Thorgar chuckled to himself, taking another long drag from his pipe.

"Aye. Could be worse."

The streets of Durgul'Um were quiet, save for the distant murmur of the tavern's lively patrons.

But in the shadows, something moved.

A large, dark-furred wolf had somehow snuck past the city gates, its keen nose catching the scent of roasting meat and spilled ale.

It prowled closer to the tavern, sniffing at the air, its yellow eyes gleaming hungrily.

And then—it caught the scent of Mugar.

The beast crept toward the back entrance, where Mugar stood, rolling a fresh barrel of ale into place.

He didn't notice the wolf creeping up behind him—not until the beast leapt.

Mugar turned just in time, and the two crashed to the ground in a tangle of fur and fists.

"OI! YE MANGY CUR!"

The wolf snapped at him, its teeth bared—but Mugar, too stubborn (or too drunk) to go down easy, wrapped his thick arms around the beast's throat.

They rolled across the alleyway, Mugar cursing, the wolf snarling and thrashing.

For a full minute, it was a blur of violence.

Then—a final snap, a strangled yelp, and silence.

Mugar, panting, staggered to his feet, dusting himself off.

The wolf lay dead at his feet.

He looked down at it, then rubbed his chin.

"Huh. That'd make a fine wall ornament."

By morning, the Frozen Ember had a new trophy.

The stuffed head of the wolf now hung proudly above the bar, its yellow eyes glassy, its snarling fangs forever bared.

Mugar, standing beneath it, grinned at the crowd.

"Right! Let it be known that The Frozen Ember ain't just famous fer ale—it's also the only tavern in Durgul'Um where the owner can strangle a wolf with his bare hands!"

A roar of approval swept through the tavern.

Elaira, shaking her head as she stirred a pot of stew, sighed.

"Ye're a damn fool, Mugar. But at least now we got a story to tell."

And indeed—it was already becoming legend.

A new song had already started spreading through the city: The Tale of Mugar the "Wolfstrangler".

The air in The Frozen Ember was thick with pipe smoke and the scent of roasted meats, the usual hum of laughter and rowdy drinking contests filling the tavern.

But Thorgar's attention was fixed on one particular voice.

An old dwarven miner, his beard long and streaked with silver, sat hunched over a mug, speaking in a tone that carried the weight of lost time.

"Aye… the Silver Ring of Everdeep. Ye ever hear of it, lad?"

Thorgar, leaning on the bar, took a long drag from his pipe.

"Can’t say I have. Sounds like a fancy bit o’ jewelry."

The old miner chuckled, shaking his head.

"Not just any jewelry. This ring was forged by Prince Durlin Ironbrow, for his betrothed. A ring said to hold a blessing from the gods—grantin’ its wearer unwavering luck. But the prince never got to give it to her. The tunnels of Everdeep collapsed, buryin’ it under mountains of stone."

Thorgar raised a brow.

"And ye expect me to believe some ring’s just been sittin’ down there all these years, waitin’ fer someone to fetch it?"

The old miner took a slow sip of ale before nodding.

"Aye. Some treasures don’t want to be lost forever. They wait."

Thorgar exhaled, watching the pipe smoke curl in the candlelight.

His thoughts drifted to Ilis.

A lucky ring, forged in love.

It’d make one hell of a gift.

He finished his drink and stood, cracking his knuckles.

"Guess I’d best see if Everdeep’s still got any secrets left."

The entrance to Everdeep lay outside Durgul'Um, hidden beneath the remains of an old mine shaft long abandoned by dwarves.

Thorgar descended into the darkness, boots kicking up layers of dust that hadn’t been disturbed in decades. The walls bore ancient dwarven carvings, depicting the glory days of Everdeep, its forges burning bright, its warriors clad in silver and steel.

Now? Only silence remained.

And something else.

A smell.

A thick, pungent, reptilian musk.

Thorgar gripped his axe tighter.

"Ain’t alone down here."

The first attack came from the walls themselves.

A troglodyte, its skin shifting to match the stone, lunged from the darkness, jagged claws slashing toward Thorgar's throat.

CLANG!

Thorgar's axe caught the creature mid-strike, deflecting its blow as he drove his boot into its gut, sending it sprawling backward.

More shapes emerged—yellow reptilian eyes gleaming in the dim light, their scaled forms shifting, blending, vanishing, and reappearing.

"Oh, piss off."

Thorgar swung wide, his axe cleaving through one troglodyte's shoulder, severing its arm.

Another lunged for his legs—he caught it mid-air, turned, and slammed it head-first into the cavern wall.

The last one hesitated, hissing, uncertain now that its kin lay bleeding on the stone.

Thorgar snarled, flicking the blood from his axe.

"Unless ye want to end up in me stew pot, I'd start runnin'."

The troglodyte fled into the tunnels, screeching.

Thorgar smiled.

"Thought so."

Pressing deeper, Thorgar found himself in an old dwarven forge, long abandoned. The air reeked of corrosion, and the scattered remnants of weapons and armor lay half-eaten by time and decay.

A low chittering sound echoed from the darkness.

Then—the glint of chitinous antennae.

"Ah, bugger."

A rust monster emerged from the shadows, its insect-like body scuttling over broken stone, its feelers twitching toward Thorgar's axe.

He stepped back—just as another rust monster dropped from the ceiling.

"OH, BLOODY HELL!"

The first lunged, its antennae brushing against Thorgar's armor.

A horrible screeching sound filled the cavern as flecks of metal began corroding.

Thorgar leapt back, cursing.

"YE DAMNED METAL-EATIN' RATS!"

His mind raced. He couldn't let them near his weapons—or he'd be fightin' with his bare hands.

Then—he saw it.

A pile of old stone tools in the corner.

"Aye, that'll do."

Grabbing a stone mallet, Thorgar hurled it at the closest rust monster, smashing its carapace with a sickening crunch.

The second one lunged, but this time Thorgar was ready.

He grabbed a broken stone spear from the rubble and drove it clean through the creature's gaping maw.

With a final shudder, it collapsed.

Thorgar huffed, wiping sweat from his brow.

"This ring better be worth all this pissin' trouble."

At last, Thorgar reached the heart of Everdeep.

A massive dwarven vault door stood before him, its surface covered in runes, long silent.

But it was blocked.

A fallen stone pillar lay across the entrance, too heavy to move alone.

Thorgar frowned.

"Hmm. Reckon I could shift it with the right leverage…"

He scanned the room, looking for anything useful.

Then—the ground trembled.

A deep, guttural growl echoed from below.

And something began to rise.

The stone shook.

Dust cascaded from the ceiling.

And then, from the depths of Everdeep's forgotten tunnels, a massive form emerged.

A Burrow Wyrm—a creature long thought extinct, its scaled hide blending with the rock, its maw lined with jagged stone-like teeth.

Thorgar stared up at the beast.

Then sighed.

"Course it wouldn't be simple."

The Burrow Wyrm reared back—

And the battle for the Silver Ring began.

The Burrow Wyrm loomed over Thorgar, its scaled hide blending seamlessly with the cavern walls, as if it were carved from the mountain itself.

Its serpentine body coiled through the ruined tunnels, thick as an ancient pillar, its jagged maw lined with rows of stone-crushing teeth.

Its eyes—black and hollow—fixed on Thorgar, and then, with a rumbling growl, it lunged.

Thorgar rolled aside, just as the beast's jaws slammed shut where he had stood, crushing stone into dust.

"Oh, pissin' hell."

The ground trembled as the Burrow Wyrm reared back, its massive tail lashing the cavern walls, sending shards of rock cascading down.

Thorgar gripped his axe, scanning the room. He couldn't face the thing head-on—it was too big, too armored.

But the ceiling…

A wicked grin crossed his face.

"Alright, ye great bastard. Let's see if ye like a taste of yer own mountain."

The Wyrm lunged again, but this time Thorgar didn't dodge.

Instead, he rushed forward, sliding beneath its massive head as it snapped at empty air.

With a roar, he swung his axe in a brutal arc—

CLANG!

The blade bit deep into the beast's jaw, cracking scales, but the Wyrm barely flinched.

Instead, it twisted violently, sending Thorgar flying across the cavern.

He crashed into a pile of rubble, coughing dust.

"Agh, aye. That felt like gettin’ headbutted by a cave troll."

The Wyrm wasn’t done.

It coiled back, then slammed its body forward—

A tremor split the ground, and Thorgar barely managed to scramble out of the way as the cavern floor crumbled beneath him.

That was when he saw it—the stalactites above.

Massive, sharp as dwarven spears, barely clinging to the ceiling.

And the Wyrm was right beneath them.

Thorgar grinned through bloody teeth.

"Alright, lizard. Time for a cave-in."

He grabbed a nearby rusted spear from the rubble—one of the many weapons lost to time in these forgotten halls.

Taking careful aim—he hurled it.

The spear struck a fragile stone pillar at the cavern’s edge.

The vibrations shook the ceiling—and with a deafening CRACK, the stalactites above shattered loose.

Dozens of massive stone spikes plummeted down—

The Wyrm shrieked, twisting violently as stone tore into its flesh, piercing through its armored hide.

With a final, thunderous groan, the beast collapsed, its body half-buried beneath the rubble.

Thorgar, panting, dusted himself off.

"Right, then. That’s one problem solved."

But he wasn’t done yet.

Beyond the fallen vault, the true prize awaited.

And if dwarven treasure had taught him anything—nothing stayed unguarded.

With the Burrow Wyrm slain, Thorgar pressed deeper into the tunnels.

Beyond the collapsed vault, he found a hidden chamber, untouched by time.

A single stone altar sat at its center, carved with ancient dwarven runes.

And there, resting upon the altar, shimmering in the dim light—

The Silver Ring of Everdeep.

"Aye… there ye are."

He stepped forward.

And the earth moved beneath him.

The ground split apart, and from the darkness below, a monstrous form erupted.

A towering, chitinous horror, its black exoskeleton gleaming, its four glowing eyes fixed on Thorgar.

A creature of the deep tunnels.

A beast that should not exist here.

The Umber Hulk.

The massive burrowing horror flexed its clawed hands, its mandibles clicking together in a sickening rhythm.

Its four unnatural eyes burned with an eerie glow.

Thorgar felt something in his mind shift.

A strange, uncomfortable pull, like his thoughts were suddenly not his own.

He staggered.

The cavern blurred.

For a brief moment, he wasn’t in Everdeep anymore.

He was… somewhere else.

Memories scrambled. The world twisted.

And then—he heard Ilis’s voice.

"Thorgar, what the hell are ye doin’? Look at me!"

He blinked—snapped back to reality.

The Umber Hulk charged.

Thorgar rolled aside, barely avoiding its massive claw as it slammed into the stone.

"Alright, no lookin’ at the bastard’s eyes. Got it."

The creature roared, its mandibles snapping wildly as it tunneled into the ground, vanishing beneath the cavern floor.

Silence.

Thorgar gripped his axe, turning in slow circles.

"Where’d ye go, ye ugly bastard?"

The ground trembled.

And then—it burst from the walls behind him.

He barely dodged, the Umber Hulk’s massive claw raking across the stone where he had stood a second earlier.

He had to fight smart.

The cavern was collapsing, chunks of stone falling from the ceiling.

If he played this right—he could bury the beast.

Thorgar dashed toward the stone altar, positioning himself just beneath a massive overhanging ledge.

The Umber Hulk roared, charging at full speed.

Just as it reached him, Thorgar dove aside.

The beast slammed into the altar—

And the cavern collapsed.

Massive chunks of stone crashed down upon the Umber Hulk, its horrifying screech cut short as the rocks buried it beneath tons of rubble.

Dust filled the air.

Silence.

Then—a single hand emerged from the dust.

Thorgar hauled himself up, coughing.

"Well. That was absolute shite."

He turned to the altar.

Somehow, through sheer dwarven craftsmanship, the Silver Ring of Everdeep still remained.

Thorgar picked it up, examining the smooth silver band, the faint glow of runes etched into its surface.

"Aye… worth it."

He slipped it into his pouch.

Now—he just had to get back out of this pissin' cave before it fully collapsed.

Goods for the Tavern

The streets of Durgul'Um were alive with the hum of everyday life. The mountain city, carved from the stone itself, stretched high and deep, with winding tunnels leading to bustling markets, merchant halls, and the roaring forges of blacksmiths.

Thorgar and Ilis strolled through the lower market district, where the scent of roasted meats, fresh-baked bread, and spiced ale filled the air.

All around them, merchants shouted their wares, haggling with eager customers, the clang of metal from nearby smithies mixing with the laughter of dwarven children playing in the alleys.

Ilis glanced up at Thorgar, her green eyes sharp with curiosity.

"So, what's got ye in such a fine mood, eh? Ye look like a lad who just found a hoard o' gold."

Thorgar grinned, patting the pouch at his belt where the Silver Ring of Everdeep rested.

"Aye, well. Let's just say I had meself a little adventure. Nothin' too fancy. Killed a couple o' monsters, dodged a cave-in, usual business."

Ilis smiled.

"Sounds like a regular Tuesday fer ye."

They walked deeper into the market, dodging a pair of arguing merchants waving their hands wildly at each other.

The first stop was Groldar’s Butchery, a sturdy wooden stall stacked high with fresh cuts of beef, boar, and thick slabs of smoked venison.

Groldar himself—a burly, one-eyed butcher with arms like tree trunks—grinned as they approached.

"Well, well! If it ain’t Stonequill and the finest bookkeeper in all o’ Durgul’Um! What can I get ye two today?"

Ilis rolled her eyes.

"Flattery won’t get ye more coin, Groldar."

Groldar chuckled.

"Aye, but it was worth a try. What’ll it be? Got some fresh wild boar in, straight from the highlands. Thick cuts. Good for stews an’ roasts."

Thorgar picked up a hefty slab of venison, testing its weight.

"Hmm. Boar’s good, but what’s the price?"

Groldar rubbed his chin.

"Thirty silver a slab. A fair price."

Ilis scoffed.

"Fair? Aye, if we were buyin’ gold-plated boar! Twenty."

Groldar let out a deep laugh.

"Twenty?! Lass, ye’d rob me blind! Twenty-five, and I’ll throw in a bit o’ sausage."

Ilis crossed her arms, tapping her foot.

"Make it twenty-two and throw in the sausage, and we’ll consider comin’ back next week."

Groldar sighed dramatically.

"Ah, ye wound me! But fine. Twenty-two it is. But only ‘cause I like ye."

Thorgar grinned, handing over the coin.

"Pleasure doin’ business, Groldar. Try not to cry too much over yer losses."

Next, they stopped at a small wooden stall packed with bundles of dried herbs, hanging garlic, and small pouches of rare spices.

An elderly dwarven woman named Maerla sat behind the counter, her wrinkled hands sorting through a pile of fresh rosemary.

She peered up at them, squinting.

"Ah, I see the Frozen Ember's lookin' to spice up its kitchen, eh? What'll it be, young ones?"

Ilis leaned forward, examining a small jar of bright red powder.

"What's this one?"

Maerla grinned.

"**Dragon's Tongue. A rare pepper from the deep tunnels. Adds heat to stews, but not just any heat—the kind that lingers in yer bones."

Thorgar chuckled.

"Aye? Sounds like somethin' that'll set a dwarf's beard on fire."

Ilis sniffed it, eyes watering instantly.

"By the gods! That'll wake up the drunkest fool in the tavern."

Thorgar smiled.

"Perfect. We'll take a jar. And some rosemary, sage, and whatever ye got for a good stout stew."

Maerla bagged the spices up, counting the coins Ilis handed her.

"A fine choice, lass. And here—" she handed Ilis a small sprig of dried thyme. "For luck."

Ilis tilted her head.

"Ain't never heard of thyme bringin' luck."

Maerla winked.

"It does if ye believe in it."

Their last stop was a vegetable cart run by an old dwarf named Ordrik, whose beard was so long it nearly touched the ground.

His stall was stacked high with potatoes, onions, turnips, and thick heads of cabbage.

Ordrik grinned as they approached.

"Ahh, the Frozen Ember folk! Good timin'! I got the best potatoes in the city. Ain't a stew or pie complete without 'em!"

Thorgar picked up a massive potato, inspecting it.

"Looks good, but is it as good as ye claim?"

Ordrik nodded sagely.

"Aye, lad. Ye could kill a goblin with one o' these."

Ilis snorted.

"That's not exactly what we're lookin' for in a potato, Ordrik."

Ordrik waved a hand.

"Bah! Point is, they're firm, full o' flavor, and they'll make yer tavern's stew legendary. Ten silver for a full sack."

Ilis arched a brow.

"Ten? Ye think we're buyin' golden potatoes? Six."

Ordrik clutched his chest dramatically.

"Six?! Ye'd have me grandchildren starvin' in the streets!"

Thorgar chuckled.

"Eight, Ordrik. And ye throw in a handful o' onions. Final offer."

Ordrik grumbled, but in the end, he took the deal.

"Bah! Ye're robbin' an old man! But fine. Take 'em. May they make yer stew so good it brings kings to yer doorstep."

With their purchases secured, Thorgar and Ilis made their way back toward The Frozen Ember, the weight of the day's haggling making their packs a little heavier—but their coin purses not too much lighter.

Ilis nudged him playfully.

"Ye did good today, Stonequill. Ye only got fleeced once or twice."

Thorgar smiled.

"Aye, and ye saved me a good bit o' coin. Maybe I should just let ye do all the talkin' from now on."

Ilis grinned, tilting her head.

"Now that'd be the smartest thing ye've ever said."

Thorgar chuckled, glancing down at the pouch where the Silver Ring of Everdeep rested.

Not yet.

The time would come.

For now, though, he had ale to brew, a tavern to run, and a damn good woman at his side.

And for once, that was enough.

The warm scent of roasting meat, sizzling butter, and fresh bread filled The Frozen Ember, spilling out into the streets of Durgul'Um and luring in hungry patrons like moths to a flame.

Inside the kitchen, pans clattered, knives chopped, and voices bickered over the bubbling pots as the tavern crew—Thorgar, Mugar, Ilis, and Elaira—worked tirelessly to prepare the grandest feast the tavern had seen yet.

Thorgar, standing by the massive stone oven, wiped the sweat from his brow as he turned a spit-roast boar over the open flame.

"By the gods, I ain't worked this hard since I caved in that troll's skull in the lowlands."

Elaira, stirring a thick pot of venison stew, snorted.

"Aye, but this is harder work, ain't it? At least trolls don't need salt and pepper."

Ilis, slicing fresh loaves of honeyed bread, grinned.

"No, but they sure smell worse."

Mugar, hauling a heavy sack of onions to the counter, groaned.

"Aye, and at least when ye kill a troll, it don't leave ye with a pile o' dishes at the end!"

The kitchen erupted in laughter, but there was work to be done.

The boar had been slow-roasting over the fire since morning, its skin crackling to a perfect golden brown. Thorgar basted it with a mix of honey, ale, and wild herbs, letting the flavors soak deep into the meat.

"Ain't no feast complete without a beast on the spit, aye?" he said, turning the roast with care.

Elaira plucked a sprig of fresh thyme and tossed it onto the fire, sending a fragrant wisp of smoke curling into the air.

"Aye, and this one'll have 'em beggin' for seconds."

Elaira’s thick, rich stew simmered in a massive iron cauldron, filled with chunks of tender venison, thick-cut potatoes, carrots, and onions.

She threw in a handful of ground black pepper and a pinch of Dragon’s Tongue spice, giving it a warmth that spread through the belly.

Mugar, sniffing the pot, wiped his nose with his sleeve.

"By the gods, Elaira, this’ll clear a man’s sinuses for a month!"

Elaira laughed, handing him a spoon.

"Then ye best take a sip and tell me if it’s too strong, eh?"

Mugar did—and immediately choked, coughing.

"YE TRIED TO KILL ME!"

Thorgar, watching from the fire, roared with laughter.

"That’s the spirit, lad! Strong stew for strong drink!"

Ilis worked fast, slicing thick loaves of sweet honeyed bread, the golden crust still warm from the oven.

Beside her, a pot of buttered turnips steamed, glistening in a mix of melted butter and sea salt.

She loaded the slices onto a massive wooden platter, handing one to Thorgar.

"Try that, tell me if it’s fit for a king."

Thorgar took a bite, chewed slowly—then grunted.

"Aye. If the king’s got any sense, he’ll have two."

Ilis winked.

"Then we better make more."

With the kitchen in full swing, Thorgar headed out to the tavern floor, wiping his hands on his apron.

He grabbed a mallet and cracked open a massive oak barrel of their finest ale, the rich, amber liquid spilling into waiting mugs.

"LADS! ALE’S FLOWIN’, SO GET YER MUGS UP!"

The tavern cheered, boots stomping, fists pounding on tables.

Patrons lined up as Thorgar poured generous mugs, passing them down the bar.

"Aye, there ye go! That one’s got a bit more head, ye’ll live. And ye! Don’t be sniffin’ it like a damn elf—DRINK!"

Mugar, meanwhile, was deep in the cellar, working on something special.

The Frozen Ember had fine ale, aye, but tonight, Mugar had something else in mind.

Wine. Dwarven wine.

Not the thin, sour piss the elves drank—but a thick, heavy brew, deep red like molten steel, aged in old whiskey barrels.

He stirred the massive vat in the cellar, watching the deep ruby liquid swirl.

"Aye, this’ll put hair on yer chest."

Elaira, peeking in from the stairwell, grinned.

"Mugar, it’s wine, not a battle strategy."

Mugar grunted, adding a dash of mountain honey.

"Aye, but if we’re makin’ it, we’re makin’ it right. Dwarves don’t drink no weak shite."

Ilis leaned on the doorway.

"And what ye callin’ it? Can’t just be ‘Mugar’s Wine,’ can it?"

Mugar paused, considering. Then grinned.

"Emberwine. Strong as fire, smooth as steel."

Ilis nodded.

"Sounds fittin’. Pour me a glass when it’s done."

By nightfall, The Frozen Ember was packed—tables lined with steaming plates of food, mugs overflowing, and the warm glow of lanterns flickering off the stone walls.

Thorgar, leaning on the bar, watched the crowd with a grin.

Elaira bustled between tables, dropping off plates of roast boar and thick-cut bread.

Ilis poured steins of ale, handing off bottles of Emberwine to eager hands.

Mugar was in the middle of a heated arm-wrestling match with a Bronzeblade warrior.

The tavern was alive with song, laughter, and the clatter of feasting.

Thorgar lifted his mug.

"To the Frozen Ember! May the ale flow forever, the food be plenty, and may no elf ever set foot in here sober!"

A roar of cheers followed.

The night stretched long, filled with drunken boasts, bellowed songs, and the kind of happiness only a full belly and a strong drink could bring.

The Frozen Ember wasn't just a tavern anymore.

It was a home.

And as Thorgar leaned back, pipe in hand, watching his friends and family, he knew—this was what he had been looking for all along.

The candle burned low, its soft flickering glow casting long shadows across the wooden walls of Thorgar's chamber.

The tavern below was still alive with laughter and music, but he had retreated upstairs, pipe clenched between his teeth, the warm scent of smoked leaf curling into the air.

On the desk before him lay his well-worn leather journal, its pages filled with the scribblings of his journey—of battles fought, ales drunk, and friendships forged.

He dipped his quill into ink, tapping it lightly against the rim, and began to write.

"The Frozen Ember is no longer just a tavern—it's a home. It is more than stone and wood, more than barrels of ale or pots of stew. It breathes with the laughter of warriors, the cheer of craftsmen, the voices of those who drink to forget their troubles and those who drink to celebrate life. It is ours, and by the gods, I'd not trade it for all the gold in the mountain."

"Today, we cooked, we drank, we feasted. I'd wager not a single soul left with an empty belly. Mugar's wine is startin' to taste like the stuff of legends, and Elaira's stew could wake a man from his grave. And Ilis—"

He paused, staring at her name on the page.

"There's somethin' different about the way she looks at me now. A spark. I've seen it before, but it burns brighter now. And aye, I feel it too. I ain't a poet, nor a fool who spins words like silk, but by the gods… I could sit beside her forever and never feel the need to move."

"Tomorrow, we go to the lake. Just the two of us."

"If I had any sense, I'd be nervous. But I ain't."

"I'm lookin' forward to it."

The next morning, the sun rose high, casting golden streaks across the still waters of the great lake outside Durgul'Um.

The boat rocked gently as Thorgar pushed off from the shore, oars slicing cleanly through the crystal surface.

Ilis sat across from him, her long auburn hair tied back in a loose braid, her green eyes bright beneath the clear sky.

She trailed her fingers across the water, watching the ripples spread outward.

"Didn’t think ye were the boatin’ type, Stonequill."

Thorgar chuckled, pulling the oars smoothly.

"Aye, well. Turns out, I’m full o’ surprises."

Ilis smiled.

"Surprises, eh? Next thing ye’ll be tellin’ me ye can dance, too."

Thorgar grinned.

"Let’s not get carried away."

She laughed, leaning back against the boat’s wooden edge, closing her eyes as the wind brushed over them.

"This is nice. Peaceful. No tavern noise, no drunkards singin’ off-key, no Mugar threatenin’ to strangle the next fool who spills his drink."

Thorgar nodded.

"Aye. Just us."

The boat drifted across the lake, carrying them toward a small island tucked in the center—a quiet patch of land, its rocky shore lined with wildflowers, its grassy hill sloping gently upward.

Thorgar pulled the boat ashore, tossing the anchor onto a rock before hopping out and offering Ilis a hand.

She took it, stepping lightly onto the island, glancing around.

"Not bad, Stonequill. Not bad at all."

They found a soft patch of grass beneath a lone, wind-bent tree, its branches swaying lazily in the afternoon breeze.

Ilis stretched out, arms behind her head, staring up at the sky.

Thorgar lay beside her, pipe resting between his teeth, watching the clouds drift.

For a moment, neither of them spoke.

Then—Ilis broke the silence.

"Tell me somethin', Thorgar. D'ye ever think about settlin' down? Fer good, I mean."

Thorgar exhaled a slow breath of smoke.

"Aye. More lately than I used to."

Ilis turned her head, looking at him with a small smile.

"And where does a dwarf like ye see himself in the end?"

Thorgar grinned.

"With a full belly, a warm bed, and a damn fine woman beside me."

Ilis laughed softly.

"That all, eh? Simple dreams."

Thorgar turned onto his side, meeting her gaze.

"Aye. Simple dreams are the best ones."

And then, before another word could be spoken—he kissed her.

Ilis didn't pull away.

Her hands found their way to his beard, fingers curling into the thick black strands as she kissed him back.

The world fell away—the lake, the sky, the distant city of Durgul'Um.

There was only warmth, only touch, only them.

The wind carried their laughter, their whispered words, their love, across the still waters.

And for that moment, nothing else mattered.

Later, as the sun dipped lower in the sky, Thorgar sat at the edge of the boat, fishing line cast into the water.

Ilis, still glowing from their time on the island, rested against the boat's side, watching him with a lazy smile.

"Ye're actually fishin' now? After all that?"

Thorgar grunted, pipe clenched between his teeth.

"Aye. Ain’t nothin’ wrong with catchin’ dinner. Besides, I figured after all the energy we burned, ye’d be hungry again soon enough."

Ilis laughed, stretching her legs.

"Aye, ye got me there. But ye best catch somethin’ big. I got high expectations."

Just then, the line jerked.

Thorgar’s eyes widened.

"Oh-ho! That’s a strong one!"

Ilis sat up, watching as he struggled with the rod, reeling hard.

"Maybe it’s a monster o’ the deep, eh? Some ancient lake beast ye’ll be tellin’ tales about for years!"

Thorgar gritted his teeth, pulling with all his strength—

And then, with a final yank, the fish came soaring out of the water.

A… small, unimpressive trout.

Silence.

Ilis stared at it.

Thorgar stared at it.

Then Ilis burst out laughing.

"That’s it?! That’s yer great catch?!"

Thorgar grumbled, unhooking the fish.

"Bah. Least it’s somethin’."

Ilis grinned, leaning over and kissing his cheek.

"Aye. And I suppose I’ll still eat it, since it’s comin’ from ye."

Thorgar sighed.

"Damn right ye will. Ain’t lettin’ it go to waste."

And with that, they floated across the lake, the boat drifting lazily as the sun set behind the mountains.

Their romance had begun.

And for the first time in a long, long while—Thorgar felt truly happy.

The tavern bustled with the steady hum of voices, the clinking of mugs, and the warmth of a crackling hearth.

Behind the counter, Thorgar and Mugar poured hearty ales, sliding frothing mugs into waiting hands.

The air smelled of roasted meat, pipe smoke, and the faint spice of mulled Emberwine.

Across the room, Ilis and Elaira moved between tables, wiping down wooden surfaces, collecting empty plates, and sweeping the floors.

Ilis, whistling to herself, tossed Thorgar a knowing glance as she wiped ale foam from a table.

Thorgar, leaning on the bar, let out a low whistle of his own, content.

"Aye, the place is runnin' smooth. Feels damn good."

Mugar, wiping down a mug, grunted.

"Aye. But I need a word with ye, Stonequill."

He jerked his head toward the back corner, signaling Thorgar to step aside.

Thorgar arched a brow.

"What's all this, then? Ye look like ye swallowed a bad turnip."

Mugar folded his arms, fixing Thorgar with a serious look.

"Ye got somethin' goin' on with me sister?"

Thorgar paused for a beat, then smiled.

"Which one?"

Mugar's eyes narrowed.

Thorgar grinned, raising his hands.

"Aye, aye. Settle yerself. Aye, I been spendin' time with Ilis. And aye, she's a fine lass. That a problem?"

Mugar sighed, rubbing the bridge of his nose.

"Nay, not a problem. But she's me sister, Thorgar. If ye're serious about her, then I want to hear it from ye. Ye ain't just—" He waved a hand. "—flirtin' for the sake of it, aye?"

Thorgar placed a hand on Mugar’s shoulder.

"Mugar, we’ve fought side by side, bled together, built this place from nothin’. I’d not treat Ilis like some tavern wench. She’s… special. And I know it."

Mugar studied him a moment, then gave a slow nod.

"Aye. Then that’s enough for me."

Thorgar grinned.

"Ye worried she’ll beat me up?"

Mugar chuckled.

"More worried she’ll out-drink ye and leave ye cryin’ in yer ale."

The two laughed, then clapped each other on the shoulder before returning to the counter.

Later that night, after the rush had slowed, a group of regulars gathered at the main table, pulling out a well-worn deck of old dwarven cards.

Ilis, Elaira, Mugar, and Thorgar joined them, the warm glow of lanterns casting flickering shadows over the wooden surface.

"Right, lads and lasses! Tonight, we play "King’s Folly," the oldest and trickiest card game in all o’ dwarvendom!" Mugar announced, shuffling the deck with practiced ease.

Thorgar leaned back, pipe in his teeth.

"Aye, let’s see if any of ye actually got the brains fer it."

King’s Folly was a game of wit, deception, and bold wagers. Played with a 52-card dwarven deck, it had three key objectives:

Build the Strongest Hold – Each player aimed to create the best set of three cards: a Warrior (strength), a Shield (defense), and a Coin (wealth). Outwit the King’s Decree – At the end of each round, a special card—the "King’s Decree"—was drawn from the center deck. This could boost or ruin a player’s hand. Bluff & Bet – The most important rule: if you made your opponents believe you had the strongest hold, they might fold too early—handing you the pot.

Each round, players took turns drawing, swapping, or discarding cards while placing bets.

The King’s Decree was revealed last, often throwing the entire game into chaos.

Mugar dealt the cards, each player receiving three.

Ilis glanced at her hand, brows furrowing.

Thorgar, watching her closely, smiled.

"Bad hand, Ilis? Ye look like someone just stole yer ale."

Ilis glanced up, eyes sharp.

"Aye, or maybe I’m just thinkin’ about what poor sod I’m takin’ gold from tonight."

Thorgar chuckled.

"Aye, we’ll see about that."

Mugar slapped down his first bet.

"Five silver to start! Let’s see who’s got the guts to stay in."

Thorgar tossed in his coins.

Ilis followed, smiling.

Elaira hesitated, then folded.

The King’s Decree was drawn.

Mugar flipped it over dramatically—

"The King Calls for War! All Warrior cards double in value!"

Thorgar grinned, laying his cards down.

A Warrior of Iron, a Shield of Stone, and a Coin of Kings.

"A strong hand, lads. What ye got?"

Ilis sighed, flipping hers.

"Bah! Shield of Wood, a Thief instead of a Warrior, and a Fool’s Coin. I’m out."

Mugar, grinning, laid his down last.

"Warrior of Blood, Shield of Gold, Coin of Storms. And since the King’s Call doubles warriors, that puts me ahead, lads!"

Thorgar groaned.

"Bloody hell."

Mugar raked in the pot of silver, laughing.

"First round’s mine! Try harder next time!"

The next round, Ilis narrowed her eyes, watching everyone carefully.

As they drew cards, she barely showed a flicker of emotion.

When betting time came, Thorgar leaned forward, studying her.

"Ye’re bettin’ high, Ilis. Ye that confident?"

She shrugged, throwing in ten silver.

"Maybe. Maybe I’m just leadin’ ye into folly."

Mugar laughed.

"She’s bluffin’. I’ll match it!"

The King’s Decree was drawn—

"The King Forgets His Fortune! Coin cards are worth nothin’!"

Mugar groaned.

"Oh, piss."

Ilis flipped her hand over.

"Warrior of the Forge, Shield of Iron, and NO bloody coins. Looks like I win this one, lads!"

Thorgar laughed, shaking his head.

"Aye, remind me never to sit across from ye at a card table again."

The games continued, mugs were refilled, and the tavern echoed with laughter, curses, and the occasional thrown peanut.

As the night wore on, Ilis, grinning, leaned against Thorgar’s shoulder.

"Ye’re not so bad at this, Stonequill. But not good enough to win."

Thorgar chuckled, draping an arm around her.

"Aye, well. Seems I won somethin’ more valuable tonight."

Mugar pretended not to hear.

But deep down, he was happy for them.

The Frozen Ember thrived, and life—for once—felt good.

Trade Guild

The door to The Frozen Ember swung open, letting in a blast of crisp mountain air—and a figure stepped inside, his boots clicking sharply against the wooden floor.

The man was short for a human, though tall by dwarven standards. His fine green tunic bore the embroidered sigil of the Durgul'Um Trade Guild, and a thick ledger was clutched tightly under his arm.

His sharp eyes scanned the room as he approached the counter where Thorgar and Mugar stood.

"Master Stonequill. Master Mugar. I am Halford Lockwin, Overseer of the Durgul'Um Trade Guild, here to conduct an inspection."

Thorgar, leaning on the bar, puffed his pipe and smiled.

"Aye? So ye're the one sent to tell us if we're runnin' an honest tavern?"

Lockwin's thin lips pressed into a small, humorless smile.

"Honesty is relative, Master Thorgar. Standards, however, are not."

Mugar crossed his arms, frowning.

"Aye, well. What exactly are ye lookin' for, then? We got ale, food, beds. People leave happy. That's all a tavern needs."

Lockwin opened his ledger, flipping through neatly written pages.

"Cleanliness. Fair pricing. The quality of your goods. The structure and size of your establishment. Seating capacity. Entertainment. Compliance with guild rules regarding gambling, fighting, and conduct within member taverns."

Thorgar let out a low chuckle.

"Wait, wait, wait. Did ye just say "rules about fightin'"?"

Lockwin nodded.

"Of course. The Trade Guild has very clear policies regarding brawls in member establishments. If a fight breaks out, it must be settled in a regulated manner—preferably in a designated dueling pit or through sanctioned competitions, such as arm-wrestling or drinking contests. Uncontrolled tavern brawls lead to property damage, injury, and, regrettably, occasional fatalities—things the guild prefers to avoid."

Mugar snorted.

"So what ye’re tellin’ me is, if some fool throws a punch in me tavern, we’re supposed to make him sign a permission slip first?"

Lockwin didn’t flinch.

"If you wish to avoid guild penalties, yes."

Thorgar shook his head, muttering.

"Absurd. Next ye’ll be tellin’ me we can’t let folk gamble either."

Lockwin sighed.

"Gambling is allowed, but only through approved guild-sanctioned games. Any unauthorized betting operations could result in hefty fines—or worse, expulsion from the guild."

Mugar grumbled.

"And what if we don’t join the guild? What’s stoppin’ us from just runnin’ the place as we see fit?"

Lockwin tapped his ledger.

"Membership ensures protection, Master Mugar. Unfair taxes, overzealous city guards, corrupt nobles seeking to extort you—these are all problems that guild members need not worry about. We ensure fair treatment under trade laws. And, of course, guild-affiliated suppliers will prioritize your business over non-members."

Thorgar and Mugar exchanged a glance.

Protection from corrupt nobles? Priority access to ale and supplies? It was tempting.

Lockwin snapped his book shut.

"Now, to business."

He strode across the tavern, taking notes as he counted tables and chairs, glanced over the bar selection, and observed the general state of the place.

After a thorough inspection, he turned back to them.

"The Frozen Ember is well-run, I’ll give you that."

Thorgar grinned.

"Aye. We try."

Lockwin adjusted his sleeves.

"The Guild Grandmaster will arrive this evening to sample your food, ale, and wine. Make sure your best is on display. He will decide whether your establishment is worthy of membership."

Mugar grunted.

"Fine. We'll be ready."

Lockwin tipped his head slightly.

"Then I shall return in a few hours. Do not disappoint us."

With that, he turned sharply and strode out, the heavy tavern door swinging shut behind him.

For a moment, there was silence.

Then Thorgar exhaled and stretched.

"Well. Ain't that a fine pile o' horseshite."

Mugar grumbled.

"Aye. But if it keeps the taxmen off our backs, maybe it's worth it."

Thorgar sighed.

"Right. Let's get to work. If we're gonna impress this Grandmaster, we need to put on a proper feast." Elaira lit fresh candles, placing them in iron sconces along the walls. Ilis polished the tables and arranged tankards and silverware with careful precision. Mugar selected three barrels of ale—one light, one dark, and one honeyed stout—setting them behind the bar. Thorgar personally inspected the wine cellar, choosing a fine aged dwarven red for the evening.

"Ye know, we don't entertain nobles much," Ilis remarked as she set a tray of fresh mugs down.

Thorgar snorted.

"Aye, an' let's hope we never have to make a habit of it."

The kitchen roared to life once more. Spit-roasted lamb seasoned with mountain herbs. Caramelized onions and roasted potatoes with thick slabs of melting cheese. Stew with boar meat, mushrooms, and Emberwine reduction. Fresh-baked bread drizzled with honey and butter. A platter of dried meats and hard cheese, paired with spiced nuts.

Mugar, rolling up his sleeves, stirred a pot of thick gravy.

"Right, I say we drown this feller in good food an' strong ale, so he don't notice whatever rules we ain't exactly followin'."

Thorgar grinned, testing a sip of Emberwine.

"Aye, or we get him so drunk he forgets the rules altogether."

Ilis chuckled.

"That’s the best plan ye’ve had all day, Stonequill."

By late afternoon, The Frozen Ember was ready. The long tables were set. Candles flickered warmly. The scent of roasted meat and spiced ale filled the air. And a feast fit for a king lay waiting.

Mugar clapped Thorgar on the back.

"Well, lad. Time to see if we’re about to be proper businessmen—or just a pair o’ stubborn bastards runnin’ a rogue tavern."

Thorgar grinned, adjusting his tunic.

"Either way, we’ll drink to it."

The hour had come.

The Frozen Ember stood in perfection—candles flickered against the stone walls, the long tables were set with steaming dishes, and the scent of roasting lamb and Emberwine hung thick in the air.

Mugar stood behind the bar, arms crossed, eyeing the door like it might sprout legs and attack.

Thorgar adjusted his tunic and cracked his knuckles.

"Right. Time to see what kind o’ bastard this Grandmaster is."

Ilis, polishing a last set of mugs, smiled.

"Let’s just hope he’s got a proper thirst."

As if summoned by the words, the tavern doors swung open.

And in walked the Grandmaster of the Durgul'Um Trade Guild.

Thorgar raised a brow.

Mugar blinked.

Ilis stared.

Because the Grandmaster was not the stiff-necked, gold-countin’ noble they had expected.

He was a dwarf.

A damn good one.

The dwarf who stepped inside was thick-built, wrapped in a fine brown cloak trimmed with silver. His beard was braided with golden rings, and his gray eyes sparkled with mischief.

He paused in the doorway, sniffed the air, then grinned.

"By the gods, that smells like proper food. Well met, lads! I'm Orik Stoneveil, Grandmaster of the Trade Guild, and I'm here to drink yer ale, eat yer meat, and see if this place is worth me bloody time!"

Thorgar and Mugar exchanged a look—and then grinned.

Mugar stepped forward, slamming a hearty mug of ale onto the nearest table.

"Then let's not waste a second, Grandmaster. Drink up!"

Orik laughed and clapped Mugar on the back.

"Aye, now that's the proper welcome I was hopin' for!"

With that, the night began.

The Frozen Ember came alive, serving the best food and ale they had to offer. Orik devoured the spit-roasted lamb, praising the seasoning. He downed three mugs of Emberwine, claiming it had "the fire of Moradin himself." He demanded a second helping of venison stew, insisting it was the best he'd had in years.

As the night wore on, it was clear the Grandmaster was enjoying himself.

But the real test had yet to come.

"Right then, lads, let's talk business, aye?" Orik said, wiping foam from his beard.

Thorgar leaned forward.

"Aye. Let's."

Orik set his mug down, tapping his fingers on the table.

"Here's the deal. I like what I see. The Frozen Ember's got spirit—good drink, fine food, proper atmosphere. But joinin' the guild ain't just about pourin' a good ale."

Thorgar raised a brow.

"Aye? Then what's it about?"

Orik grinned.

"Reputation. Influence. Respect. A guild member tavern represents the city. Means ye follow the rules, pay the dues, and keep the guild's good name."

Mugar grunted.

"And what do we get in return?"

Orik chuckled.

"Protection. Good business. The best trade routes. And—" He leaned in, voice lowering. "—fewer problems with taxmen and nobles."

Thorgar stroked his beard.

"Aye… that last bit's appealin'."

"Aye, it is." Orik leaned back. "But I need one more thing before I decide.**"

Thorgar narrowed his eyes.

"Oh? And what's that?"

Orik grinned.

"A proper dwarven challenge."

Silence.

Then—Mugar snorted.

"Oh, I like this bastard already."

Orik stood, rolling up his sleeves.

"Three challenges. If ye win two out o' three, The Frozen Ember joins the guild. If ye lose? No deal."

Thorgar grinned.

"Aye. And what are we bettin'?"

Orik grinned back.

"Pride. And a whole barrel of yer best ale."

Mugar grinned wider.

"Then let's get to it."

A target was set up across the tavern—an old shield hanging on the wall.

Each dwarf took turns hurling axes, trying to land the best shots.

Orik went first, landing his axe straight in the center.

Mugar followed, hitting just off-center.

Thorgar gritted his teeth, adjusted his grip… and threw.

BULLSEYE.

The tavern cheered.

Thorgar grinned.

"One fer the Ember. What's next?"

Mugs were filled with the strongest ale The Frozen Ember had to offer.

Orik, Thorgar, and Mugar sat side by side, tankards in hand.

Ilis counted down.

"THREE—TWO—ONE—DRINK!"

They chugged.

The crowd chanted.

"DRINK! DRINK! DRINK!"

Mugar slammed his mug down first.

Thorgar followed—just seconds behind.

Orik… leaned back, sighing.

"Ahhh. Good drink, but I ain't as young as I used to be."

He set his mug down a full two gulps behind.

Mugar grinned.

"That's two wins fer us. That's game."

Orik chuckled.

"Aye. But I still want the last challenge. Just fer fun."

A strange but ancient dwarven test—two dwarves would grab each other's beards and pull, to see who could withstand it the longest.

Orik grinned.

"Who’s got the guts to take me on?"

Thorgar cracked his knuckles.

"I do."

The two dwarves locked hands in each other’s beards.

They pulled.

Neither flinched.

They pulled harder.

Veins bulged. Eyes watered.

A full minute passed.

Orik grinned through gritted teeth.

Thorgar grinned back.

And at the exact same moment—they both let go.

Orik laughed.

"Aye! Ye got guts, Stonequill. I like ye."

Orik lifted his mug.

"The Frozen Ember is now an official guild tavern! Ye’ll have the trade routes, the protection, and—most importantly—one hell o’ a reputation."

The tavern roared in celebration.

Thorgar, leaning against the bar, watched it all unfold with a smile.

Another victory.

And the next chapter of The Frozen Ember had begun.

A Noble Request

Morning came early at The Frozen Ember, and with it, a visitor of high standing.

The noble who strode into the tavern was a tall, broad-shouldered man clad in fine crimson and gold, his boots polished to a gleaming shine, and a heavy ring set with a sapphire on his right hand. His hair was slicked back, a well-groomed beard lining his jaw, and an air of arrogance surrounded him like a cloud of expensive perfume.

Thorgar, still shaking off the last of sleep, glanced up from behind the counter, his fingers curled around a steaming mug of morning ale.

Mugar, scrubbing out a tankard, muttered.

"Oh, look. A peacock found its way into me tavern."

The noble ignored him and walked straight to Thorgar.

"Master Stonequill, I presume."

Thorgar took a slow sip of ale before answering.

"Aye. And ye are?"

The noble placed a parchment on the counter, tapping it with a single ringed finger.

"Lord Aldric Vasthane. I require your services. Tomorrow night, I am hosting a private feast for forty distinguished guests. I need tables, music, a proper selection of food, and of course, only the finest ale and wine. I expect nothing but excellence."

Mugar arched a brow.

"Ye expectin’ forty nobles to fit in here? This ain’t no palace hall."

Lord Vasthane waved a hand.

"I’ve seen your work, and the Frozen Ember is gaining a name. If you can impress the Trade Guild, you can handle my gathering. Name your price."

Thorgar exchanged a glance with Mugar and Ilis, who had appeared from the kitchen, wiping flour from her hands.

Ilis leaned in, whispering.

"Could be good coin. Nobles pay well if they like what they see."

Thorgar, after a moment’s thought, nodded.

"Aye, we'll do it. Fifty gold for the feast, and ye cover any extra costs for special ingredients or musicians."

Lord Vasthane smiled.

"Done. I shall arrive with my guests tomorrow evening. Do not disappoint me."

With that, he turned and strode out, his boots clicking against the stone.

Mugar snorted.

"I don't trust that one. Somethin' about 'im stinks worse than week-old fish."

Thorgar grinned.

"Aye, but his coin don't. Let's get to work. We got a feast to prepare."

The next day, The Frozen Ember roared with activity.

Thorgar hired a bard—Jorren the Silver-Tongued, a half-elf with a talent for spinning tales and plucking the lute like he was born with it in his hands.

Ilis and Elaira worked tirelessly in the kitchen, preparing platters of roasted meats, fresh-baked bread, honeyed pies, and spiced vegetable dishes.

Mugar oversaw the ale barrels, ensuring only the finest drinks were brought up from the cellar.

By the time evening fell, the tavern was transformed. Candles flickered along the tables, the scent of roasting boar and Emberwine filled the air, and the tables were lined with the finest silverware The Frozen Ember had to offer.

Lord Vasthane arrived with his guests, dressed in lavish silks and velvet cloaks. The noblemen and women took their seats, servants hovering at their backs, eyes sweeping the tavern with a mix of curiosity and mild disdain.

But once the food and drink started flowing, the mood softened.

Jorren struck up his lute, his voice weaving through the air like honeyed mead.

"Gather, ye travelers, weary and worn,
Raise up yer cups, let sorrow be torn!
For ale is a healer, and songs are our might,
Drink deep and be merry, and toast to the night!"

The guests laughed and clapped, the nobles drinking deep from their goblets, their faces flushed with good cheer.

The night seemed to be a roaring success.

Until one noble—a tall, lean man with dark eyes and an even darker grin—sidled up to Thorgar as he refilled a tankard.

The noble, sipping his wine, tapped a ring against the counter.

"This is a fine establishment, Master Stonequill. A real… opportunity."

Thorgar narrowed his eyes.

"Aye? What's yer meanin' there?"

The noble sighed, swirling his wine.

"Durgul'Um is a harsh city. Fortunes rise and fall. Businesses thrive or… vanish. The Frozen Ember, for all its charm, is still new. Unprotected. Vulnerable."

Thorgar stiffened.

"Is that a threat, lad?"

The noble laughed softly.

"A simple fact. The city guards have been known to… misunderstand certain operations. Raids happen. Businesses get shut down. Now, I would hate to see that happen to such a fine place."

He leaned in, voice low.

"For a small share of your earnings—say, twenty percent—I can ensure the Frozen Ember remains untouched. Safe. Thriving."

Thorgar's grip on his tankard tightened.

"Twenty percent? Lad, I'd sooner piss in yer wine than give ye a copper."

The noble's smile didn't falter.

"Think it over. The guards can be… unpredictable. I'll expect an answer in two days. If not, well… best to start locking your doors."

With that, he drained his goblet, set it down, and walked back into the crowd.

Thorgar stood there for a moment, watching him go, blood simmering.

Then, without a word, he strode toward the kitchen, where Mugar, Ilis, and Elaira were plating another round of food.

The door shut behind them, sealing them in the small back storage room.

Mugar looked up from slicing bread.

"Why’s yer face look like someone pissed in yer porridge?"

Thorgar gritted his teeth.

"Because some noble just tried to muscle in on our business."

Ilis crossed her arms.

"Who?"

"Some smug bastard. Said if we don’t give ‘em twenty percent o’ our earnings, we’ll have city guards sniffin’ round like rats in our cellar."

Mugar’s face darkened.

"That’s extortion."

Thorgar snorted.

"Aye, no shite."

Elaira, quiet but sharp, frowned.

"We need to be careful. Nobles don’t throw threats lightly. If we refuse, we need to be ready for whatever they send."

Mugar gripped his knife tightly.

"I say we refuse and make it clear that if they try to push us, we push back harder. We ain’t lettin’ some silk-wearin’ bastard take what we built."

Thorgar nodded slowly.

"Aye. But we do it smart. We don’t act yet. We wait, see what happens. If they send guards, we make ‘em regret it."

Ilis exhaled, shaking her head.

"First the Trade Guild, now this. Dwarven tavern keepin’ ain't as peaceful as I thought."

Thorgar chuckled darkly.

"Aye, well. That’s the price o’ success. Now, let’s get back out there before they start wonderin’ where we vanished to."

The decision was made.

The Frozen Ember was theirs.

And no noble was going to take it from them.

A few weeks had passed in peace since the grand feast. The Frozen Ember thrived, its name spreading through Durgul'Um as a place of fine drink, hearty food, and no tolerance for fools.

The noble who had demanded his cut had sent no word, and for a time, it seemed as if his threat had been an empty one.

But then—one evening, just as the tavern had begun to fill with regulars, the door swung open.

A man stepped inside, wrapped in a dark cloak, his thin, rat-like face scanning the room. His beady eyes settled on Thorgar, and he strode up to the counter with the confidence of a man who thought he owned the place.

Thorgar, cleaning a tankard with slow, deliberate movements, barely looked up.

"Ain’t servin’ rats tonight. Try the sewers."

The man smiled thinly.

"No need for insults, Master Stonequill. I come with a simple request."

He leaned in slightly, voice lowering.

"It’s been some time since you last spoke with my employer. I believe you were given fair warning, and yet, no payment has been made."

Thorgar snorted.

"Aye? And what warning was that? The one where yer noble master tried shakin’ us down like we’re a bunch o’ frightened merchants? Or the part where I told him he could eat shite?"

The man’s eye twitched, but his smile remained.

"Perhaps you should reconsider. My lord is not a patient man. And patience tends to run thinner when gold is involved."

Thorgar leaned on the bar, meeting the man’s gaze.

"Here’s my reconsideration: Ye can walk out that door, tell yer master that The Frozen Ember pays no bastard for breathin’, and keep all yer teeth. Or, ye can stay here a little longer and leave on a stretcher."

The man’s expression darkened, but he said nothing.

Instead, he nodded once, adjusted his cloak, and strode out into the night.

Mugar, standing nearby, arms crossed, grunted.

"Well, that’s done. What ye reckon?"

Thorgar picked up his mug and took a slow sip.

"I reckon we'll be seein' more o' them bastards soon enough."

And sure enough—they came.

A couple of hours passed, the tavern now bustling with life.

Then, the door swung open again—this time, with the heavy stomp of boots.

Four city guards in polished chainmail entered, their hands resting on their weapons.

The lead guard, a burly man with a scar down his cheek, scanned the room before stepping forward.

"By order of the city watch, we are here to conduct a search of this establishment."

Thorgar grinned, taking a long drink before setting his mug down.

"Search for what, exactly? Runaway whores? Misplaced dignity?"

The lead guard sneered.

"Contraband. Illegal substances. We've received reports that The Frozen Ember is operating outside the law."

Mugar, leaning against the counter, scoffed.

"Aye? From who? Some noble whose purse strings are a little tight?"

The guards ignored him, already moving toward the cellar door.

Thorgar, still seated, watched them go.

"Right, then. Help yerselves. If ye can find somethin' illegal down there, I'll let ye take it. But if all ye find is ale and barrels, I expect an apology and a round o' drinks for wastin' our time."

The lead guard gave him a humorless smile.

"Oh, I'm sure we'll find something."

Some time passed as the guards searched the cellar.

Then, the lead guard reappeared, a triumphant look on his face.

"Well, well. Seems you lads have been brewin' something… extra special."

Mugar frowned.

"The hell ye talkin’ about? We brew our own ale, aye, but nothin’ unnatural."

The guard smiled.

"Then you won’t mind if we confiscate the barrels, just to be sure."

Thorgar’s face darkened.

"Aye, I do mind. That ale is ours. If ye take it, ye best have proof of yer claim."

The guard shrugged.

"Proof or not, we have the authority to seize goods under suspicion. Of course… if you’d prefer to avoid that trouble, a simple payment of, say, three hundred gold would make all this go away."

Silence.

Mugar’s eye twitched.

Ilis, watching from the bar, gripped a knife a little tighter.

Elaira, standing by the kitchen door, shook her head.

Thorgar slowly stood.

"Lad… ye shoulda just ordered a drink and left."

The lead guard barely had time to register what was happening before Thorgar grabbed him by the collar and slammed him headfirst into the stone wall.

A dull CRACK echoed through the tavern as the man crumpled to the ground, his helmet rolling away.

One of the other guards drew his sword.

Mugar roared like a wild beast, grabbed the bastard by the waist, lifted him clean off the ground, and smashed him into the wooden floorboards.

"Ye want our ale, do ye?! Here’s what I think o’ that!"

He brought his heavy boot down on the man’s head, the sickening crunch lost beneath the chaos.

Another guard lunged at Thorgar, blade flashing.

Thorgar dodged, but not fast enough—the sword sliced across his arm, drawing blood.

"Ah, ye pissin’ bastard!"

Before the guard could strike again, Ilis hurled a tankard at his head, the metal mug slamming against his temple.

The man stumbled, and Thorgar took the chance—driving his fist into the guard's gut, then an uppercut that sent him sprawling.

The last remaining guard, wide-eyed, made a run for the door.

Mugar was faster.

He grabbed a stool and hurled it like a hammer, smashing into the fleeing man's back.

The guard hit the floor hard, groaning.

Thorgar, breathing heavy, wiped blood from his arm.

The two remaining conscious guards scrambled to their feet, dragging their wounded with them.

The lead guard, clutching his broken nose, spat blood onto the floor.

"This ain't over, you bastards!"

Thorgar grinned, shaking out his bruised knuckles.

"Aye, well. Tell yer master that the next bastard who tries this won't be walkin' home."

The guards staggered out, disappearing into the night.

For a moment, the tavern was silent.

Then, Mugar snorted.

"Well, that escalated, didn't it?"

Ilis sighed, crossing her arms.

"What now?"

Thorgar, grabbing his pipe and lighting it, exhaled slowly.

"Now? We wait. And if they come again, we finish it."

This wasn't over.

But one thing was clear—The Frozen Ember was nobody's to take.

Mugar marched through the stone corridors of the Trade Guild Hall, boots clapping against polished floors as he made his way to the overseer's office. The guild was built into the heart

of Durgul'Um, a place where merchants brokered deals, gold flowed like water, and backroom whispers decided the fate of businesses.

Halford Lockwin’s office door stood slightly ajar. Mugar didn’t bother knocking—he pushed it open and strode in.

Lockwin, a quill in hand, glanced up from a pile of ledgers. His expression flickered between surprise and mild annoyance.

"Ah, Master Mugar. To what do I owe this… abrupt visit?"

Mugar, still reeking of ale and pipe smoke, crossed his arms.

"I’m here about that so-called 'protection' ye promised when we joined the guild."

Lockwin sighed, setting down his quill.

"You’ll need to be more specific. The guild oversees many concerns."

Mugar leaned forward, placing his calloused hands on the polished desk.

"Specific? Aye, I’ll give ye specific. Four guards came into me tavern today claimin’ our ale is illegal, demandin’ three hundred gold or they’d take our barrels. When we refused, they tried to rob us blind. It don’t take a genius to know they were sent by Myrman Oakwell."

Lockwin’s expression remained neutral, but Mugar caught the way his fingers drummed the desk—an unconscious sign of unease.

"Yes, I heard about the… unfortunate altercation. A misunderstanding, I’m sure. But Master Oakwell is a valued businessman, and—"

Mugar gritted his teeth.

"Aye, I knew it. Ye’re in his pocket, aren’t ye? That’s why ye ain’t liftin’ a damn finger! Protection from corrupt nobles was part o’ the deal. Now we’re supposed to just bow an’ let ‘im take what we built?"

Lockwin adjusted his collar.

"This is… complicated. Master Oakwell is an established figure within the trade landscape of Durgul'Um. He ensures stability. If I were to intervene in a simple dispute—"

Mugar’s fist slammed onto the desk, rattling ink bottles.

"Simple dispute?! That rat is runnin’ a feckin’ extortion racket, an’ ye know it! If the guild stands by while he shakes us down, then yer word ain't worth a goblin’s fart."

Lockwin sighed, spreading his hands.

"I’m sorry, Master Mugar, but this is beyond my influence. My advice? Find a… diplomatic solution."

Mugar stared at him for a long moment. Then he snorted, shaking his head.

"Aye. I hear ye loud an’ clear. Ye’d rather keep yer fat purse than do what’s right."

He turned on his heel and stormed out, slamming the door behind him.

The message was clear—The Frozen Ember was on its own.

Later that evening, Thorgar stepped outside the tavern, pipe clenched between his teeth. The air was cool, crisp, the scent of roasted meat and ale still drifting from within.

He leaned against the wooden railing, watching the city’s dim lantern lights flicker in the distance.

Then—a rustle.

His ears twitched.

Footsteps, soft and deliberate.

Thorgar exhaled smoke through his nostrils.

"If ye’re lookin’ for a drink, we’re open till dawn. If ye’re lookin’ for trouble, well… ye just found it."

Silence.

Then—a shadow moved.

A man lunged from the darkness, dagger flashing under the moonlight.

Thorgar barely had time to react—he twisted, dodging the blade by inches, but the assassin’s weight slammed into him, driving them both against the stone wall.

Thorgar gritted his teeth as the blade scraped across his shoulder.

"Sneaky bastard."

The two struggled, fists hammering into ribs, knees slamming into stomachs. The assassin was fast, but Thorgar had strength on his side.

They crashed into the ground, rolling over the dirt and gravel.

Then—a snarling growl.

Thorgar barely had time to turn before a massive black hound leapt from the shadows, fangs bared.

The beast sank its teeth into his arm, ripping through leather and flesh.

"Feckin' mutt!"

Pain flared up his arm, but Thorgar was no stranger to wounds. He grabbed the dog by its thick neck, twisting with all his might.

The assassin, taking advantage of the distraction, straddled Thorgar's chest, dagger raised for a killing blow.

Thorgar snarled, one hand gripping the hound's throat, the other scrambling for his own knife.

The dagger came down.

At the last second, Thorgar slammed his own blade into the assassin's windpipe.

The man's eyes widened, blood gurgling from his lips as he choked.

Thorgar twisted the knife hard.

With a sickening crack, he wrenched the assassin's head to the side until his neck nearly came off.

Blood sprayed across Thorgar's chest, warm and thick.

The assassin's body twitched, then went still.

The hound, still growling, snapped its teeth again—but Thorgar was already moving.

He wrapped an arm around the beast's throat, locking it in a crushing grapple.

The dog thrashed, claws raking his chest, but Thorgar held firm, gritting his teeth.

Slowly… the beast's struggles weakened.

And then—nothing.

Thorgar let the body drop, panting.

From inside, voices raised.

Mugar, Ilis, and Elaira rushed outside, weapons in hand.

"What in the feck—" Mugar stopped dead, eyes locking onto the bloodied corpses.

Thorgar, still catching his breath, wiped his arm across his mouth.

"Well. Looks like they sent a dog after me."

Ilis stared, then cursed.

"Gods, Thorgar. Ye’re torn up. We need to wrap those wounds."

Thorgar grinned, spitting blood onto the dirt.

"Aye, but first, we got a bit o’ cleanin’ to do."

Under the cover of night, the party dug a deep grave behind the tavern.

The assassin and his hound were dragged unceremoniously into the pit.

Mugar spat into the hole before shoveling dirt over them.

"No headstones fer bastards like this."

Thorgar, wrapping a bandage over his torn arm, exhaled.

"This ain’t over. Oakwell sent ‘im, no doubt about it."

Ilis leaned on her shovel, frowning.

"So what now?"

Thorgar met Mugar’s gaze.

"Now? Now we strike first."

Mugar’s grin was slow and wicked.

"Aye. Time to remind ‘em that ye don’t feck with dwarves."

They patted down the last of the dirt, erasing any sign of what had happened.

The plan was simple—if the city guards and the guild wouldn’t stop Myrman Oakwell, then Thorgar and Mugar would do it themselves.

They gathered their gear in The Frozen Ember’s back room.

Mugar strapped a thick leather vest over his tunic, grimacing as he tested the straps.

"Ain’t proper armor, but it’ll stop a blade if I’m lucky."

Thorgar slipped a dagger into his belt, then checked his short sword.

"If luck’s what ye need, lad, ye might as well stay home. This ain’t gonna be luck—it’s gonna be quick and brutal."

Ilis, standing nearby, arms crossed, frowned.

"This is madness. If ye get caught, they'll hang ye."

Thorgar grinned.

"Aye, but if we don't do it, Oakwell will keep sendin' rats our way. It's time to remind him that pokin' dwarves comes with a price."

Mugar snorted.

"Aye. That price is blood. Let's go."

The two slipped out into the dark streets, their boots silent against the cobblestones.

They reached the Noble Quarter, where stone buildings loomed over the streets, their windows flickering with the warm glow of candlelight.

The problem? They didn't know exactly where Oakwell lived.

They wandered near a group of city guards, stationed at a street corner, laughing amongst themselves.

Thorgar approached, his tone casual.

"Oi, lads. Lookin' for Myrman Oakwell's place. Got a delivery fer 'im. Where's the bastard live?"

One of the guards, a stocky man with a half-broken nose, smiled.

"Eastern corner of the Noble's Quarter. Big stone house, iron gate, pair o' guards outside. Can't miss it."

Thorgar gave a nod.

"Appreciate it. Here—have a drink on me."

He flipped the guard a silver piece before walking away.

Mugar chuckled as they left earshot.

"Easiest bit o' thievin' we've done all year."

They moved through the streets, careful to avoid drawing attention. Soon, they found it—Oakwell's mansion.

A three-story estate, its windows dark, its gates guarded by two men in chainmail.

Mugar grunted.

"No walkin' in the front door, then. Round the back?"

Thorgar nodded.

"Aye. Let’s climb."

They moved through a side alley, finding a wooden plank leaning against the wall.

With careful steps, they clambered up and jumped into the back courtyard.

Thorgar gestured upward.

A stone balcony loomed above them.

Mugar pulled a coiled rope from his belt.

"Hope them ale barrels we carried built yer arms, lad. Up ye go."

Thorgar took the rope, hooked it on the balcony’s railing, and climbed.

At the top, he reached down, gripping Mugar’s wrist and pulling him up.

They stood on the second-floor balcony, staring at a sturdy wooden door.

Mugar pulled out his knife and jammed it into the lock.

With a soft snap, the lock broke, and the door swung open.

Inside—a dimly lit study, lined with books and a heavy oak desk.

Thorgar glanced at a nearby jewelry case.

"Would be a shame to leave empty-handed."

He pocketed a few necklaces, a silver goblet, and a gold ring.

Mugar snorted.

"Let’s find the bastard and be done with it."

They slipped through the hall, searching room by room.

Until—they found him.

Myrman Oakwell slept soundly in his chamber, sprawled across a luxurious feather-stuffed mattress.

The room reeked of perfume and wine, his velvet curtains drawn shut.

Mugar moved first—grabbing a pillow and pressing it over Oakwell’s face.

The noble jerked awake, flailing.

Before he could move, Thorgar smashed a fist into his gut.

Oakwell choked, gasping as the air was knocked from his lungs.

"Rise and shine, ye piss-stinkin’ coward." Thorgar growled.

Mugar leaned in, voice a low rumble.

"Ye’re gonna forget about The Frozen Ember. No more guards, no more demands. Or next time, we don’t wake ye up. We just cut yer throat."

Oakwell stopped struggling. Then, despite everything—he chuckled.

"You think this changes anything?" His voice was hoarse, but his arrogance remained. "You can’t touch me. Kill me, and the city watch will hunt you down like rats."

Thorgar and Mugar exchanged a glance.

Then—they changed tactics.

They dragged Oakwell from his bed and tied him to a chair.

Oakwell sneered.

"Fools. Untie me, and I might consider not having you both flayed alive."

Thorgar leaned in, dagger in hand.

"Aye? Ye think this is a game? Fine. Let’s play."

And with that—he drove the dagger into Oakwell’s kneecap.

Oakwell screamed.

Thorgar twisted the blade.

"Not feelin’ so powerful now, are ye?"

Oakwell thrashed, pain twisting his face.

"Stop! Gods, stop!"

Mugar grinned.

"Say the words, ye sack o’ piss. Say it, or ye lose the other knee."

Oakwell, sweating, gasping, finally broke.

"Fine! FINE! I’ll leave ye alone! Just—just stop!"

Thorgar pulled the knife free, wiping the blood off on Oakwell’s sleeve.

"That’s better."

Oakwell slumped in the chair, his arrogance shattered.

Mugar leaned in close.

"If we hear so much as a whisper o’ trouble from ye, we’ll be back. But next time? We won’t bother talkin’."

Oakwell nodded frantically, eyes wet with pain.

Thorgar **grinned, then—**he smashed his fist into Oakwell’s jaw, knocking him out cold.

Mugar sighed.

"Let’s get the feck outta here."

They slipped back through the house, but as they reached the hallway—

A voice shouted.

"INTRUDERS!"

Two guards stormed in, swords drawn.

Mugar growled.

"Guess we ain’t leavin’ quiet, then."

The fight was fast and brutal.

Thorgar slashed the first guard across the throat, sending him gurgling to the floor.

Mugar took a cut to his arm but swung his hammer into the second guard’s chest, breaking ribs and sending him crashing into the wall.

They rushed back to the balcony, climbing down as shouts filled the mansion.

Within minutes, they were back in the alley, disappearing into the night.

Mugar, clutching his bleeding arm, sat at the counter while Ilis stitched him up.

Thorgar poured them both a drink.

"Well, lad. That was a fine night’s work."

Mugar chuckled, wincing.

"Aye. Here’s to Oakwell’s knees."

They clinked mugs.

For now, The Frozen Ember was safe.

The Frozen Ember was packed with the usual warmth of flickering lanterns, clinking mugs, and the low hum of laughter.

Thorgar was behind the bar, wiping down a tankard, while Mugar leaned against the counter, his wounded arm still wrapped in fresh bandages.

Then—the door slammed open.

Six city guards stormed inside, their polished breastplates gleaming in the firelight. The room fell silent as every patron turned to stare.

At the front of the group, a stern-faced sergeant stepped forward, his hand resting on the pommel of his sword.

"Thorgar Stonequill. Mugar of the Frozen Ember. By order of the city watch, ye’re under arrest."

Mugar straightened, a slow scowl forming on his face.

"Aye? And what’s the charge? Brewin’ ale too strong fer soft bellies?"

The sergeant didn’t smile.

"Breaking into Lord Myrman Oakwell’s estate. Assault. Torture. Theft. Ye’re to come with us."

A ripple of murmurs spread through the tavern.

Thorgar set the tankard down and crossed his arms.

"That’s a mighty big list o’ shite. We ain’t done a damn thing wrong."

The sergeant exhaled through his nose.

"Aye, well, that’s not what Lord Oakwell’s tellin’ us. Now ye can come quietly, or we’ll drag ye out by yer beards."

Mugar, fists clenched, looked ready to fight.

Ilis placed a hand on his arm, shaking her head.

Thorgar sighed, rolling his shoulders.

"Fine. We’ll go. But if ye put me in a damp cell, I expect a drink on the way."

The guards shackled them both, leading them through the cold streets as tavern-goers whispered behind them.

The dungeons beneath the city watch barracks were damp, carved into the mountain rock, the air thick with the scent of mildew and sweat.

Thorgar and Mugar **were shoved into wooden chairs, their shackled hands resting on the stone table. Across from them sat their interrogator—**Nunk Riverwood.

A thin, sharp-faced human, with greased-back black hair and cold gray eyes.

He folded his hands on the table, a bored expression on his face.

"Thorgar Stonequill. Mugar. Let’s make this simple."

He flipped open a ledger, clearing his throat.

"Lord Myrman Oakwell has filed a formal accusation against you both. He claims that, two nights ago, you unlawfully entered his home, assaulted him, tied him to a chair, tortured him with a knife, stole valuables from his study, and murdered two of his guards."

Thorgar snorted.

"Didn’t know we were that busy. What else did we do, spit in his wine?"

Nunk ignored him.

"The punishment for such crimes is severe. But I want to give you the opportunity to confess. If you do, I may be able to negotiate leniency."

Mugar leaned forward, chains rattling.

"And if we don’t?"

Nunk sighed, flipping a page.

"Then a formal trial will begin in three days. And I can assure you, Lord Oakwell will ensure the court sees you both hang."

Thorgar exhaled, leaning back.

"Lad, lemme make somethin’ clear—Oakwell’s the one who sent an assassin after me. That bastard tried shakin’ us down for gold. He’s a liar, a crook, an’ a snake. Ye really think we’re gonna sit here an’ nod along to his horseshite?"

Nunk smiled.

"That’s a fine story, Master Stonequill. But let me ask you—where’s your proof?"

Mugar gritted his teeth.

"And where’s his feckin’ proof, then?! He got witnesses seein’ us in his house? He got guards that can swear to it? Or is he just flappin’ his gums while ye nod along?"

Nunk sighed dramatically.

"Lord Oakwell is a respected member of Durgul'Um’s noble society. You, on the other hand, are two tavern keepers with a history of… unruly behavior."

Thorgar grinned.

"Aye, we drink, we brawl, an’ we don’t take shite from bastards. That don’t make us criminals."

Nunk shrugged.

"You can deny it all you want. The truth is, the court will believe a noble over a pair of rogue dwarves. That’s just how the world works."

Mugar let out a bitter laugh.

"Oh, so this was decided before we even walked through the door."

Nunk stood, dusting off his sleeves.

"Confess, and maybe you live. Deny it, and you’ll dance on the gallows. Think it over."

He turned, stepping toward the door.

Thorgar leaned back in his chair.

"Ye really think Oakwell’s gonna stop with just us? The bastard’s greedy. A snake like ‘im will want more, an’ one day, he’ll come fer ye too."

Nunk paused at the door.

"Perhaps. But until that day comes, I am not the one in chains."

He walked out, the iron door slamming shut behind him.

Mugar grunted, cracking his knuckles.

"That fecker is bought and paid for. Ain’t no justice in this city."

Thorgar sighed.

"Then we make our own. We ain’t dyin’ in no noose, Mugar. We’ll find a way."

The city watch left them alone in the damp, candle-lit cell.

Their fate now rested in a trial that was already rigged against them.

The great stone hall of Durgul'Um's courthouse was filled to the brim. Torches lined the walls, their flickering light casting long shadows over the gathered nobles, merchants, and common folk who had come to witness the trial.

At the center of the room stood a raised stone platform, where the jury of twelve dwarves, merchants, and officials sat in heavy wooden chairs. Before them was High Judge Ormund Firegrip, an aging but sharp-eyed dwarf with a thick iron-gray beard.

Thorgar and Mugar stood in the center, their wrists still bound in iron chains. The guards flanked them, watching closely.

At the other side of the hall, Myrman Oakwell sat in a high-backed chair, his face pale but composed, his left knee still bandaged from the 'visit' he had received.

Judge Firegrip raised a hand, and the murmuring crowd fell silent.

"Thorgar Stonequill. Mugar of the Frozen Ember. Ye stand accused of unlawful entry into the estate of Lord Myrman Oakwell, theft, and the grievous assault of a noble. How do ye plead?"

Thorgar grinned slightly, shaking his head.

"Not guilty, yer honor. In fact, I'd say we're the ones who've been wronged here."

The jury murmured at his confidence.

Firegrip narrowed his eyes.

"Lord Oakwell, present yer accusations."

Myrman Oakwell stood, leaning slightly on a cane. His voice was calm, measured—practiced.

"Honorable court, I am a humble businessman, a nobleman of Durgul'Um, and a man of peace. These two ruffians—these criminals—broke into my home, assaulted me while I slept, tied me to a chair, tortured me, and left me crippled!"

A murmur of shock ran through the room.

Oakwell gestured toward Thorgar and Mugar.

"These are no simple tavern keepers. They are violent men—known brawlers, thieves, and troublemakers. They have long run The Frozen Ember with no regard for the laws of this city, and now they have taken to robbing nobles in their sleep. If the court does not punish them, where does it end? Will merchants be next? Will the city's coffers be raided? We must act now before lawlessness takes root in our streets!"

The jury exchanged uneasy glances.

Judge Firegrip looked to Thorgar.

"Do ye have a defense?"

Thorgar grinned.

"Aye. A damned good one."

He stepped forward, his chains clinking.

"Aye, we broke into his house. I won't lie about that. But ye know why? 'Cause this bastard —" he pointed a thick finger at Oakwell, "—sent an assassin to kill me in cold blood.**"

The court gasped.

Oakwell shook his head in feigned disbelief.

"Lies! Where is your proof, tavern rat?"

Thorgar let out a short laugh.

"Proof? Ye want proof? I buried the bastard behind me tavern after I snapped his feckin' neck."

The jury whispered among themselves, alarmed.

Mugar stepped forward, his voice booming.

"Oakwell came to us demandin' we pay him twenty percent o' our earnings—or he'd send the city guard to shake us down. And guess what? He did. They came, tried to rob us blind, an' when we told 'em to piss off, this snake here sent a killer after me friend."

Oakwell stood, outraged.

"This is absurd! The court will not be swayed by the drunken ramblings of criminals!"

"Enough!" Firegrip slammed his gavel against the stone block.

"The court will hear from outside voices before a ruling is made."

A voice rang out from the crowd.

"I will speak for Thorgar Stonequill!"

The crowd turned as a broad-shouldered dwarf in fine plate armor stepped forward—Lord Rorgrim Bronzeblade, head of the Bronzeblade Clan.

Behind him, two others stepped forward—Lady Helga Gemvein, draped in expensive silks, and Grandmaster Borgrim Deepdelver.

The room erupted in murmurs.

Firegrip narrowed his eyes.

"State yer reasons for speakin'."

Lord Bronzeblade strode to the center.

"These two saved this city from civil war. They stopped the guild wars. They found the lost heir of Durgul'Um. They have bled for this city more than most nobles I see sittin' in this court."

Lady Gemvein nodded.

"And if Oakwell truly sent assassins after them, then the only crime committed here is the court entertainin' this nonsense trial."

Borgrim Deepdelver spoke last, his voice calm but commanding.

"I have spent me life servin' the traditions o' this city. And I'll be damned if I let a weasel like Oakwell ruin it. The Bronzeblades, Gemveins, and Deepdelvers stand together on this—Thorgar and Mugar are no criminals."

The jury was now deep in discussion, whispering furiously among themselves.

Firegrip raised his gavel.

"Enough. The jury will make its ruling."

The jury deliberated for nearly an hour, the courtroom growing restless.

Finally, the foreman of the jury stood, clearing his throat.

"In the case of Lord Myrman Oakwell versus Thorgar Stonequill and Mugar, the jury finds that while their actions were outside the law, they were provoked by Oakwell's own dealings. Furthermore, given the testimony provided, we find Lord Myrman Oakwell guilty of extortion, attempted murder, and abuse of power."

The room gasped.

Oakwell's face drained of color.

Judge Firegrip slammed his gavel.

"Lord Myrman Oakwell, ye have brought shame upon the noble houses of Durgul'Um. By order of this court, ye are stripped of yer lands and wealth and sentenced to life in the dungeon."

The guards moved in, slapping shackles onto Oakwell's wrists.

"No! This is a mistake! You can't do this! I AM A NOBLE!"

Thorgar grinned, watching as Oakwell was dragged toward the dungeon gates.

"Aye, well. Nobles make shite prisoners, lad. Enjoy yer new home."

Oakwell screamed curses as he was thrown into the darkness.

The chains on Thorgar and Mugar were unlocked.

Mugar rolled his shoulders, stretching.

"Gods, ‘bout time. Me arms were gettin’ stiff."

Thorgar grinned.

"Aye. Let’s go home. I could use a feckin’ drink."

As they stepped into the streets of Durgul'Um, the fresh mountain air filling their lungs, they knew one thing—The Frozen Ember was theirs. And no one would ever try to take it again.

Frozen Ember

The doors of The Frozen Ember were thrown open, and the smell of roasting meat, spiced ale, and pipe smoke drifted into the streets of Durgul'Um.

Inside, the tavern was packed from wall to wall, dwarves and humans alike crammed into every corner, mugs clashing, laughter booming, and songs roaring above the chaos.

At the center of it all, Thorgar and Mugar sat at the head of a long table, surrounded by warriors, merchants, and guildmasters.

Lord Rorgrim Bronzeblade, clad in polished mail, raised his mug.

"To Thorgar an’ Mugar, the mad bastards who knocked a noble down to the feckin’ dungeons! May Oakwell rot, an’ may yer ale never go dry!"

A thunderous roar of approval filled the tavern as mugs clashed together, ale spilling over the wooden tables.

Thorgar grinned, lifting his own tankard.

"Aye, an’ may the next bastard who tries takin’ from us end up the same!"

Laughter followed, and another round was poured.

Lady Helga Gemvein, the merchant, leaned in toward Thorgar with a smile.

"Now that ye've toppled a noble, ye ever think about takin' the seat yerself? Might be good to have a proper dwarven ruler in the Noble Quarter."

Thorgar snorted, shaking his head.

"Aye, sure. First thing I'd do is raise taxes on fools who talk trade in me tavern."

Mugar laughed, slapping the table.

"That's why ye'd make a terrible noble, lad. Ye got no patience fer paperwork."

Borgrim Deepdelver, who had been quietly sipping his drink, finally spoke.

"Nobility or no, what matters is that the right folk hold the power now. Oakwell's gone, an' the Bronzeblades, Gemveins, an' Deepdelvers can keep this city stable."

Rorgrim grinned.

"Stable? Bah! I say we drink till the feckin' sun comes up!"

And with that, another round was poured.

Jorren the Silver-Tongued, half-drunk on free ale, plucked at his lute, swaying on his feet.

"A song! A song!" the crowd roared.

Jorren nodded blearily, strumming a slow tune before belting out in a deep, dramatic voice:

"Down in the deeps where the ale runs strong,
Dwarves fight, drink, and sing all night long!
Blades may clash and bones may break,
But nothing's stronger than ale we make!"

The crowd cheered—but as Jorren reached for an impossibly low note, his face turned red, his eyes rolled back, and with a final, breathless gasp—

THUD.

He collapsed onto the floor, arms outstretched, his lute landing beside him.

For a moment, there was silence.

Then, roaring laughter shook the room.

Mugar wiped a tear from his eye.

"Poor bastard tried to sing lower than a dwarf. A fatal mistake."

Thorgar grinned.

"Someone wake ‘im up or roll ‘im under the table. He’ll be fine."

At the far end of the tavern, a heated arm-wrestling match had turned into a full-blown brawl.

A Deepdelver miner was locked in a wrestling hold with a Bronzeblade warrior, both roaring as they crashed into chairs, sending mugs flying.

"Aye, lads, if ye break me tables, ye pay fer ‘em!" Thorgar shouted, but he was grinning.

In another corner, a throwing knife contest had begun.

Mugar, now properly drunk, watched with amusement.

"See that? That lad just threw his knife into the ceiling. He’ll be sober by next week."

Meanwhile, at the bar—the grandest test of dwarven might had begun.

The Beard-Pulling Contest.

Two dwarves locked hands in each other’s beards, gripping tight and pulling with all their might.

One of them, a red-haired Bronzeblade, gritted his teeth.

"By Moradin’s arse, I ain’t losin’ to no Gemvein!"

The Gemvein dwarf, his own beard braided in gold, sneered.

"Aye? Then pull harder, ye half-bearded whelp!"

The contest lasted a full minute before both dwarves, eyes watering, released at the same time.

Ilis rolled her eyes.

"Dwarves. Always findin’ new ways to hurt themselves."

Elaira grinned, pouring more drinks.

"Aye, but they pay well for it."

The tavern’s coffers filled with gold that night, tankards never empty, songs and fights alike filling the air.

Thorgar leaned against the counter, watching it all with a satisfied grin.

"We did it, lad. We ain’t just runnin’ a tavern. We built a damn legend."

Mugar clinked his mug against Thorgar’s.

"Aye. An’ we ain’t stoppin’ anytime soon."

The Frozen Ember was alive—louder, stronger, and richer than ever.

And as the mugs clashed once more, the night carried on in the way only true dwarves knew how—

With ale, fists, and laughter.

The laughter and music still echoed from downstairs, but up in his room, Thorgar had other matters to attend to.

Ilis stood near the window, her dark auburn hair catching the soft glow of the candlelight. She leaned against the stone wall, arms crossed, a knowing smile on her lips.

"So, ye just watched the Bronzeblade lad rip half his beard out fer a bet an’ didn’t stop ‘im?"

Thorgar chuckled, stepping closer.

"Aye, well, seemed rude to interrupt. Besides, that’s how dwarves show respect. Pain an’ pride go hand in hand."

Ilis laughed, shaking her head.

"Mad, the lot o’ ye. But I suppose that’s why I like ye."

Thorgar smiled, then reached into his belt pouch.

"Speakin’ o’ likin’ things… I want ye to have somethin’."

He pulled out the Silver Ring of Everdeep, the faint runes along its surface shimmering in the candlelight.

Ilis’ eyes widened slightly.

"That’s… that’s the ring ye went lookin’ for, ain’t it? In the cursed tunnels?"

Thorgar nodded, his voice quieter now.

"Aye. Found it in the heart o’ the mountain. Thought o’ keepin’ it fer meself… but no. It belongs to someone special. Someone who deserves it."

He took her hand and slid the ring onto her finger.

"I want ye to have this."

Ilis looked down at the ring, silent for a long moment. Then, she smiled—a real, warm smile, rare and unguarded.

"It’s beautiful, Thorgar. Thank ye. Truly."

She leaned up and kissed him—soft at first, then deeper.

When they parted, she smiled again, tapping his chest.

"Don’t think this means ye get free ale. Ye still pay like everyone else."

Thorgar laughed, shaking his head.

"Aye, aye. Ye run a tight ship, woman."

Ilis stepped back toward the door, still looking at the ring.

"I best get back downstairs before Mugar drinks the place dry. I’ll be back later."

Thorgar watched her leave, the ring catching the light as she closed the door behind her.

He sighed, rubbing his beard.

"Well, that went better than fightin’ an umber hulk."

Thorgar sat down at his wooden desk, pulling out his thick leather-bound journal.

He dipped his quill into ink, letting the candle flicker beside him as he began to write.

"The bastard sent a killer after me. Thought he’d finish the job in the dark like a rat. Didn’t work out for him. A grave behind The Frozen Ember is all that’s left of the fool. His dog put up more of a fight than he did. Pity I had to kill the beast—it deserved a better master."

"Then came the trial. Oakwell, drippin’ with lies, tryin’ to paint us as common thugs. But we had the truth on our side, an’ more than that—we had friends. The Bronzeblades, Gemveins, Deepdelvers… all standin’ beside us. That’s worth more than gold. An’ in the end, justice won. Oakwell’s rottin’ in the pits now, where he belongs."

"An’ tonight, we celebrated. The ale flowed like rivers, the songs shook the rafters, an’ the poor bard damn near passed out tryin’ to hit a low note. Bronzeblades brawled, Deepdelvers wrestled, and I won more gold than I lost at dice (for once). The Frozen Ember has never seen a night like this. Aye, we’ve built more than just a tavern. We’ve built somethin’ grand."

"And Ilis… aye, I gave her the ring. I don’t know what comes next, but I know one thing—I don’t regret givin’ it to her."

He leaned back in his chair, stretching.

"Good night’s work."

Thorgar reached for his pipe, stuffing it full of Blackhay—his strongest tobacco.

He lit the end, took a deep pull, and exhaled a thick, swirling cloud of dark gray smoke.

The air in the room grew hazy, the candlelight flickering behind the twisting fog, his face hidden behind the curling wisps.

He grabbed his goblet, taking a long gulp of fine Emberwine, letting the warmth spread through him.

Finally, he kicked off his boots, tossed his tunic over the chair, and climbed into bed.

His eyes had barely shut when the door creaked open.

Ilis slipped inside, silent as a shadow.

She climbed in beside him, her body warm against his.

"Told ye I'd be back, didn't I?" she murmured.

Thorgar grinned, eyes still closed.

"Aye. An' fer once, I ain't arguin' with ye."

The sounds of the tavern still carried from below, but Thorgar let it all fade.